

BLOOD STONE 007™

BIZARRE CREATIONS SHOOTS THE NEXT BOND

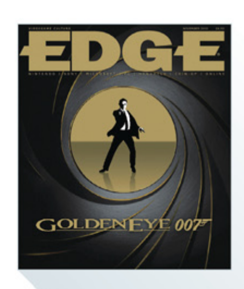
GOLDENEYE 007
Retooling the FPS classic for the Wii generation

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS
Treyarch explains how it's making the biggest game of the year

BOBBY KOTICK
Gaming's most powerful player answers his critics







When Mario Puzo came up with the character of Sonny Corleone in The Godfather, clearly he wasn't thinking about how his creation might fit into the context of a videogame, and neither was Ian Fleming when he dreamt up James Bond. Nevertheless, both of these feisty fellows have appeared in contemporary videogames, and not always entirely convincingly. The difference is that no one ever really expected a game based on the movie treatment of Puzo's book to fly, while the question aimed at an interactive version of 007 is more frequently something like: how can it *not* work?

In today's Bond, as played by Daniel Craig, we have a hero whose approach to fighting, firefights and driving cars at reckless velocities could hardly be more attuned to the kind of activities accustomed to videogame players. That the next Bond vehicle will be a game and not a movie, then, makes a whole lot more sense than most licensing deals.

The fact that Bizarre Creations, the team behind *Blur* and the *PGR* series, is making it happen via a collaboration with veteran Bond movie writer Bruce Feirstein only serves to endorse its prospects. Our report from the studio, which begins on p50, looks at how the modern British secret agent's values are being captured in game form via *Blood Stone*, and we also take a look at the reimagining of an N64 classic in the form of Wii firstperson shooter *GoldenEye*.

Both games will have to go some to displace *Call Of Duty: Black Ops* in the mind of bookmakers as the game to outsell all others in 2010, and on p60 we talk to Treyarch, the studio charged with picking up Infinity Ward's trail once more, and giving new life to the military FPS genre.

Bankrolling all of these escapades is Activision Blizzard, whose CEO, Bobby Kotick, we also interview this issue. Contrary to how he's sometimes portrayed, we didn't need to travel via a secret underground monorail system in order to meet him, and as far as we could tell he doesn't have a high-powered laser device mounted above a table anywhere within his headquarters, but our time together revealed plenty about how the most powerful man in gaming oversees his empire. The discussion begins on p68.





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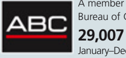
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"Can you play any other tune?"



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realtime worlds





DEVELOPMENT

A brief history of Realtime Worlds

APB and Crackdown insiders help us examine how reality caught up with Dave Jones' dreams

On August 17, Realtime Worlds went into administration. The announcement came just six weeks after the release of *All Points Bulletin* (*ABP*) – the culmination of a decade of development and over $100 million in investment. Two hundred developers lost their jobs and the studio lost the pool of experience and talent it had painstakingly amassed over years.

This is the story of how one of UK development's brightest lights went out so suddenly, and why its destruction lay in its roots.

Realtime Worlds' founder, Dave Jones, is a dreamer. The kind of dreamer who makes worlds. He created *Lemmings*, co-founded DMA Design and was one of the key creators behind the first *Grand Theft Auto*. According to a former senior colleague, "Dave has these crazy, desirable, infectious dreams that he describes with great conviction. It's that sense of such a clear, compelling vision that makes people believe in him. Some of us used to wear foil hats to protect us from Dave's Jedi mind tricks."





Psygnosis co-founder Ian Hetherington (above left) is chairman of Realtime Worlds. Dave Jones founded the Dundee-based company in 2002 and is its creative director

"Dave has these crazy, infectious dreams that he describes with great conviction. It's that sense of such a clear, compelling vision that makes people believe in him"

Realtime's games – *Crackdown, APB* and the company's hurriedly revealed and ambitious Google Earth-cum-MMOG *Project: MyWorld* – weren't entirely plucked from Jones' imagination. In fact, their origins can be traced back to the crumbling of another Britsoft company at the turn of the millennium.

British developer Rage Software, founded in Liverpool in 1992, expanded into publishing in 2000. It was a move that would prove disastrous.



This type of team identity wouldn't be possible without *ABP*'s extensive customisation tools. But was it necessary to give players this power at the expense of a better game at launch?

At the time, Dave Jones was in charge of Rage Scotland, which was based in Dundee. It developed *Mobile Forces*, a firstperson shooter that included vehicle-based combat and had a heavy focus on cooperative competition. The studio was also working on early prototypes, based on *Mobile Forces* technology, of a game known as *CarWars*. *CarWars* eventually mutated into *Crackdown*.

Not before Rage Software went bust, though. First, a series of high-profile titles – notably a Beckham-branded football game – flopped and so, in 2002, the company slimmed down from nine studios to four. With the help of Psygnosis co-founder Ian Hetherington, Dave Jones performed a management buyout of the studio in April and Realtime Worlds was born. Nine months later, Rage filed for bankruptcy.

The buyout enabled Jones to continue work on *CarWars* and begin to turn it into *Crackdown*. One developer looking back at the development process described the original aim as "delightfully insane". It was envisioned as a "small-scale MMORPG with a contemporary setting and all of the turn-based plodding, such as combat, made more realtime and thrilling". Over time, that vision was scaled down from thousands of simultaneous players to dozens to, ultimately, two.

As features were cut from *Crackdown*, they began to appear in a parallel prototype – a prototype that would eventually morph into *APB*. Realtime Worlds' ambition needed more capital, though, and in April 2004 it secured its first external funding: £1.05 million from Scottish Enterprise and a venture fund named CIM. The company went on a recruitment drive, nearly doubling in size to 75 staff over the next two years.

With *Crackdown* nearing completion, and with a publishing deal for *APB* secured with Korean MMOG publisher Webzen, Realtime Worlds announced an even bigger coup in December 2006: an investment of $31 million from New Enterprise Associates, a US-based venture capital fund that had invested in Xfire (sold to Viacom in April 2006 for $102 million) and subsequently backed Playdom (sold to Disney in July 2010 for up to $763 million).

Money talks

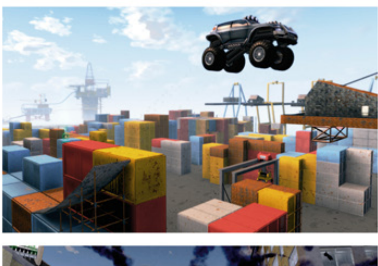
The cash injections that gave life to *APB*

As you can see from the figures below, investment in *APB* was hardly lacking. It speaks volumes of Realtime's expectations for the game, in fact, that it was prepared to shoulder so many weighty investors.

Date	Amount	Investor(s)
January 2010	$21.0m	Unknown
April 2008	$51.0m	Maverick Capital, NEA, WPP
December 2006	$31.0m	NEA
April 2004	$1.5m	CIM Venture Fund, Scottish Enterprise
	Total: $104.5m (£67.3m at Sept 2010 exchange rate)	

Source: GAMESbrief







Luke Halliwell (left) worked on the mysterious *Project: MyWorld* and sympathises with his former boss Dave Jones, whose management style "isn't well suited to 200-person teams". *Crackdown 2*, meanwhile, is alive and well in the hands of Ruffian Games, and has recently received add-on content

Things were looking great for Realtime Worlds. *Crackdown* launched in February 2007 to good reviews, including an **Edge** 8. But insiders say that *Crackdown* was already suffering from some of the problems that would beset *APB*, not least Jones' grandiose visions for the project.

"We need dreamers like Dave in the industry to get the ball rolling and feed the development machine. What we don't need is a lack of control over the reality," one former colleague told us. Another said that *Crackdown* would have "failed completely if Microsoft hadn't become seriously concerned about the project's process and taken the whip hand in getting the game completed". Many of the elements that would make *Crackdown* successful were already there. They just weren't sufficiently polished and tightened up to make a commercial release until a team of contractors (many of whom went on to form Ruffian Games), were drafted in by Microsoft.

> **"We need dreamers in the industry to get the ball rolling and feed the development machine. What we don't need is a lack of control over the reality"**

Jones' creative vision tempered by Microsoft's intervention bore fruit. *Crackdown* sold over 1.6 million copies and, in 2007, Realtime Worlds posted revenues of £5.5 million. The company continued to develop *APB* and also worked on *Project: MyWorld*, an attempt to create a 3D virtual world that would enable thirdparty developers to set any game they liked in a simulation of the real world. It was sufficiently secret that it was only revealed to the public shortly before Realtime Worlds filed for administration – at least seven years after the project began life.

Realtime Worlds made Dundee a creative hub for videogames in Scotland. The management recruited some of the brightest coders, artists and online game experts from around the world. They were drawn to relocate by the promise of working on an ambitious, well-funded game by a world-respected developer with serious financial firepower. Firepower that grew further when Realtime Worlds raised an additional $50 million in Series B financing from original investors NEA, together with Maverick Capital and the investment arm of advertising giant WPP in April 2008.

It looked as if nothing could go wrong. Realtime Worlds decided it wanted to self-publish *APB*. It bought back the rights from Webzen for $10.4 million and the promise of royalties up to $2 million. Staff numbers rose to more than 200, with a salary bill approaching £7 million a year. But *APB* still hadn't shipped. And, internally, concerns were being raised.

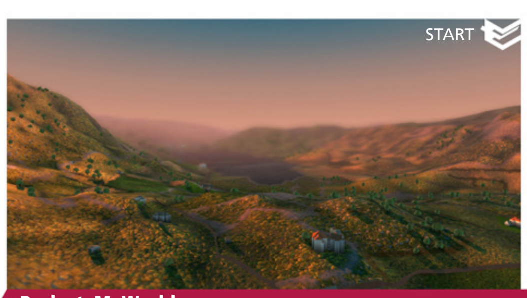
Luke Halliwell was a key member of the technology team on *MyWorld* and was in a strong position to observe the process of the development of *APB*. "Dave's very laid back," he tells us. "He has a dream and a vision, but isn't a details person. His style isn't well suited to 200-person teams. I even felt sorry for him, because I felt he had trouble figuring out how to direct a team of that size to get what he wanted done."

Everyone we've spoken to talks of Jones as a thoroughly decent man. As the lynchpin of the entire organisation he's modest, shy and has great vision, but he's uncomfortable with conflict or even saying what he really thinks in public. As one developer tells us: "When stuff is demoed to Dave, he often refrains from saying what he really thinks about a feature until he can make a private comment later to the design or production team."

This development style worked well on *Lemmings* and *GTA*. It might work today on a Facebook or iPhone game with low initial budgets and an iterative development plan. For a project as ambitious as *APB*, it proved to be ruinous.

"The $100 million [Realtime Worlds raised an





Project: MyWorld

Charting a new take on social gaming

If you thought *APB* was ambitious, it's got nothing on *Project: MyWorld*. It's designed to be an online platform that enables thirdparty developers to create games in a 3D representation of the real world. Google Earth meets *Second Life*, if you will, described as "the 'Placebook' for a next generation of social games." There are challenges to this concept, though, not least that it appears to have Realtime's trademark ambition and high minimum technical specifications. One programmer who's worked on it tells us: "I worry that we've built a web client in fat-client form," meaning that casual gamers might be put off by the need to download and install the platform. A platform is a great business if you can make it work, but all good platforms have a killer app that drives initial take-up. The new owners of *MyWorld* need to identify that app quickly.

additional $20 of emergency funding in January 2010] was a bit of a curse," says Halliwell. "Parkinson's Law says that work expands to fill the available time – we had so much money, we built accordingly." Perhaps more damningly, the company failed to hire a strong executive producer to focus on turning *APB* from a collection of ideas to a tight product ready for release.

"*Crackdown* benefited hugely from the efforts of Billy Thompson [now creative director of *Crackdown 2* developer Ruffian Games], because Billy was the type of guy who would cheerfully tell Dave to fuck off," one staffer tells us. "Billy considered *Crackdown* his game and went out to bat for its interests. I'm not sure if *APB* had that kind of representation at the design table."

Despite mounting financial pressure, *APB* slipped into 2010. The company began to tweak the code and certain problems became apparent. First, the game required extremely high specs to run. Second, things had moved on technically, commercially and stylistically in its lengthy development cycle. *APB* entered a market filled with stellar, subscription-free shooters such as *Left 4 Dead*, *Modern Warfare 2* and *Team Fortress 2*. Realtime Worlds had spent so long chasing the dream that by the time *APB* launched, it couldn't find a big enough audience to pay its bills. In August, the administrator announced that the game had 130,000 registered players, a number that turned out to be too small to support Realtime Worlds any longer. The Dundee dream was over.

Calling in the administrators so soon after the launch of *APB* is symptomatic of what went wrong with Realtime Worlds. An online game needs to be tweaked and adapted after launch as its developers learn what gamers really like doing. Realtime Worlds bet the farm on *APB* but didn't have enough money for continued iteration.

It was, after all, conceived over five years ago, at a time when a game was expected to be feature-complete and highly polished at launch. The company implemented expensive and unnecessary extras such as the advanced customisation tools, which could have been released after launch, before it even knew if its game had an audience.

APB tried to combine two design philosophies: a highly polished and content-filled game blended with iterative, continuous post-launch development. It failed on both counts and picked up a series of unenthusiastic reviews. The game wasn't polished enough, but nor was it a minimum viable product that would allow Realtime to keep enough money back to build the game around a core, supportive userbase.

The tragedy is that the latter, iterative, strategy might have worked. A senior member of the company, who wishes to remain anonymous, tells us: "There is a hard core of gamers who love that game to bits. They invest a lot of time. They invest a lot of money. They absolutely adore the game. There just aren't enough of them."

Another says: "We were trying to be bold in a market that has limited true innovation. But the creative process combined with a technology play is very complex. When you start with that big creative vision, you run the risk that the market changes around you. *Red Dead Redemption* took just as long to deliver as *APB* did, but the market was still ready for that title."

The Realtime Worlds story isn't over yet. *APB* is still running and being updated with incremental improvements, including an overhauled driving model by a skeleton crew helping the administrator find a buyer. *Project: MyWorld* has been bought by a mystery American company that hasn't yet made its plans public. But the dreams behind these games seem unlikely to define their fates.

In the end, the eight-year saga of Realtime Worlds was one of ambition and vision that management failed to temper with commercial realities. *Crackdown* was lucky. *APB*, developed with the ethos that produced *GTA* and *Lemmings*, was much less so. It attempted to reach into the future of gaming, but spent so much time trying to get there that it got left behind.



APB (see our review on next-gen.biz) faces an uncertain future. At version 1.41 at the time of writing, its driving and shooting mechanics have been much improved, and the game will continue to receive patches and content-expanding updates



INTERVIEW

The life of Live

The boss of Xbox Live in Europe discusses going beyond gaming



Xbox Live Europe general manager **Jerry Johnson** (right) was at the Edinburgh Interactive Festival to speak about the evolution and future of the service. We talk to him about the motivations behind the service's shift from online gaming to entertainment centre.

When Xbox Live was first conceived it was an online gaming service – at what point did it turn into something wider for Microsoft?
Even at the earliest stages we used to have these principles: my games, my friends, my digital entertainment lifestyle. When you look at Xbox 1 and through the launch of 360, we really amped up the 'my' aspect. From the get-go we knew it was about the social aspects. Even at that time when we didn't have any media streaming directly, with partnerships like Zune or Sky or Netflix, even then we worked together with [Windows] Media Centre to make this device something that allowed you to extend media into your experience. I would say that from the get-go we knew that was the path we wanted to be on.

How has the uptake of Sky and the social media features been?
As both Sky and Microsoft are public companies we don't go into any kind of detail on things like usage numbers, but I can let you know that if the service were a game title it would be one of the top titles in the market. Not *the* top, it's not *Call Of Duty*, don't get me wrong, but the nice thing about it is extended usage – we're seeing a lot of consistent users, and whenever people are watching live TV, we're seeing double-digit percentages of people doing it with two or more people. So we're seeing the community aspects around this, and during a sporting event that percentage doubles again. We know that people come together – they want to experience things together, and when you build that around something like a Premier League football game, it gels it even more.

> **"If the social media service were a game title it would be one of the top titles in the market. Not the top, don't get me wrong, but we're seeing a lot of consistent users"**

How do you feel XBLA has developed?
Well, it launched on the original Xbox as a disc-based thing – you had to put the disc in and then download content. That was tough to manage. I think it was a centrepiece for when we launched Marketplace and 360. I think it's brought a lot of different games to the market and I love the way it's been expanded by the XNA community games. You can pretty much find any type of game you want looking across those. Some are better than others, but I think that the Arcade platform has been wonderful.

What will expand the numbers using Live?
Right now we've got 25 million live members – those are active members. I think Kinect is going to help [expand that], and I think the new console helps, with Wi-Fi built into it. This year we're expanding from 26 markets into 35, including Russia, the Czech Republic, Poland and South Africa. I think each of these are going to help grow not just the installed base of units but also the Live service.

Was Xbox Live a big risk, given how online worked out for Sega's Dreamcast?
Did you know that America Online started out as a company called CVC that was supposed to be the online gaming service for the Atari 2700? That was kind of surprising. It went bust,





The original Xbox Live Arcade – delivering games such as *Marble Blast* (left) – looks primitive against today's Xbox 360 iteration



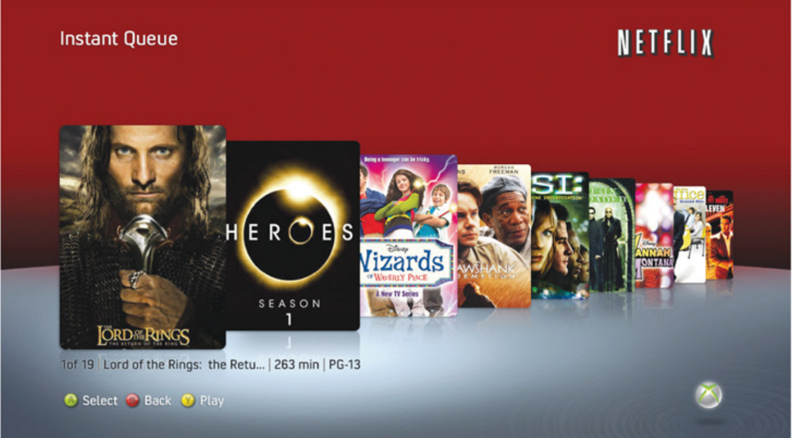
MORE MONEY, MORE PROBLEMS

Zynga might be made of money, but its latest marketing campaign for *Mafia Wars: Las Vegas* was a step too far for the San Francisco Attorney's office. Freshly printed $25,000 bills were stuck to sidewalks around the city, directing passers-by to the *Mafia Wars* website, in what has been described as "acts of sidewalk vandalism". Zynga's follow-up promotion, recruiting rapper Snoop Dogg to detonate an armoured truck in the Nevada desert (above), was equally unusual and understated.

tinyurl.com/25kbill







Integration with TV service Sky Player (top) and compatibility with Netflix's movie streaming (above) has led to Xbox 360 moving away from its gaming roots to become a living room entertainment hub. Microsoft will not reveal take-up numbers for either service, however

obviously, and Steve Case came in and made it AOL. But you're right, it was a risk.

J Allard was one of the pioneers who helped launch the service and he's still pretty active in his consulting phase right now. Everyone said, "Why are you putting an ethernet port on the back of that? Nobody has broadband – it's 2001." The penetration was so low. But J used to say: "You can't eat pizza through a straw. What we're serving up is pizza with a lot of toppings, when we start this service."

So to say it was bold, yes, and J empowered us with that mentality that Live was going to be not just a strategic differentiator – which, in Microsoft-talk, often means you're going to lose money – but it was going to be a significant part of the experience. In Xbox 1 days it was just ten per cent penetration, but it's become not only central to what we are today, but to the future of gaming, and Microsoft, and what we're going to be – broader than gaming entertainment.

Do you think launching Live earlier than other online gaming services has given you a continued advantage?

I'd like to think that the experience and momentum we built with the gaming community is what really moved us forward. I know there's a lot of talk about core and broad, but I still look at our biggest proponent, and our biggest asset, as the core gamer. That's who's passionate about Live, that's who uses it on a regular basis, that's who's introducing Sky to their family.

I still think that when we look at our biggest assets, it's our current userbase, our current customer. They're going to be our biggest proponent. They're the ones who are going to talk to this broader audience and convince them that there's something here.

Are you positioning Live and Xbox 360 as a whole as an entertainment centre now?

I think that distribution of content to a TV set is going to be a commodity. Everyone should realise that. One of the things that I think is going to be a big differentiator is, how do you enhance that content – how do you change it, not just distribute it? That's where I think Live comes in. We're adding features annually that actually wrap social networking together with game mechanics around the consumption of content. I think that within the next three to five years this whole participatory culture, and the ability to actually change content, not just consume it differently, is something that people are going to expect. Live is not just another distribution point.

Newswire



Takahashi rolls out

Having worked at Namco (now Namco Bandai) for over a decade, game director and designer Keita Takahashi (above) has decided it's time to move on. His tenure at Namco was spearheaded by *Katamari Damacy* in 2004 (with sequel *We Love Katamari* getting a PAL release in 2006) and his most recent work is *Noby Noby Boy* on PSN and iPhone. In a recent interview with technology blog The Setup, Takahashi described how inefficiency meant he'd "only made four games in 11 years." He also highlighted his continuing involvement in the redesign of a play park in Nottingham.



Online may not have defined Sega's Dreamcast, but *Crazy Taxi* was a hit on the console, and its upcoming release via XBLA will bring back memories of a more innocent era

SOUND BYTES

"I have no doubt our efforts resulted in the *Mafia II* launch party… being a dismal failure. When we first heard about this marketing event only recently, we went into action, using our resolve to challenge an event whose purpose was to mock the Italian American community by promoting the new videogame *Mafia II*."
A victory speech by **Andre DiMino** who, along with the Italian American organisation UNICO National, protested Take Two's launch event in New York

"The party was a success on all fronts that it was intended to be a success on, and Mr DiMino celebrating the event 'failing' is like Muhammad Saeed al-Sahhaf – commonly known as 'Baghdad Bob' – proclaiming that the American Army were committing suicide outside of Baghdad's gates while American tanks were literally outside his front door."
Daily Games News' **Christopher Bowen** puts a different spin on the same shindig

"All gamers deserve a happy ending, and after all of us gamers feeling the full range of emotions about *Duke Nukem Forever*, I am thrilled to be in a position with the trust, power and means to make it happen."
Gearbox president **Randy Pitchford** on bringing Duke's long-lasting limbo to an end

"I won't spoil how exactly this happens right now – though I plan to revisit it once the game has been out for a few months – but in what I found a striking series of epic moments I got to play not just the end of the game I was in, but also the beginning of the game I was in and, even more, the beginning of the game I had played years ago."
Roger Travis, of livingepic.blogspot.com, has a go at explaining the time-space quandary of playing *Halo: Reach*

"I refuse to live without the new *Halo*."
A webisode spin-off from American TV show Chuck takes product placement to new highs/lows





Capcom's leading man

No stranger to claret, Keiji Inafune tells us how mixing Japanese and western DNA will keep it ahead of the game

Keiji Inafune (above) is reclining on a chaise longue in a swish hotel room. As the head of R&D and global production at Capcom, such regal behaviour might be entirely justified, but Inafune informs us that it's all down to a recent spinal injury. It certainly hasn't dulled his spirits, however, so as *Dead Rising 2* launches we ask him about overcoming the cultural differences between Canadian and Japanese studios, the dangers of compromising Capcom's personality, and the blurring of lines between gaming and other creative industries.

In your new role as head of Capcom's global R&D, supervising many titles, you must be more hands-off than before.
I came up with some titles, therefore I had to produce them by myself. I'm still very hands-on, probably even more now, and I enjoy that.

What is the value of crossmedia releases like your Zombrex: Dead Rising Sun movie – are they purely promotional?
It used to be the case that you would wait for the full game to come out and information was only released on the game's site. The more you know about a game, the higher the expectations for it will be. So I believe these are great campaign tools.

It's difficult to imagine a tie-in movie being released ten years ago. Do you think such tools are symptomatic of today's industry?
You're quite right. If I shot Zombrex ten years ago, even if I wanted to give it away free of charge, there wasn't anywhere that I could put it up for users. I couldn't have gone through the regular route of cinema, but with the internet I can instantaneously communicate with the community.







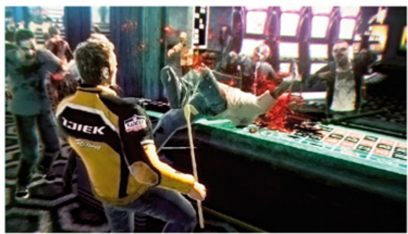
Despite being more accustomed to creating videogames than movies, Inafune looks at home in the director's chair on the set of tie-in Zombrex: Dead Rising Sun. The film is spread across eight downloadable episodes, and pays homage to '60s and '70s zombie flicks







Though ambitious in scope and decidedly western in tone, *Lost Planet 2* (below) met with a disappointing response from reviewers. It certainly hasn't dulled Inafune's passion for the franchise, though



Despite Inafune's desire to unload buckets of blood, *Dead Rising 2*'s visceral imagery still managed to get a pass from Japanese ratings board CERO, thanks to the game's positive themes

***Lost Planet 2* received a muted reception – do you intend to continue with the franchise?**
I came up with the concept for the original *Lost Planet* and got involved quite a bit. However, regrettably, *Lost Planet 2* was done by someone else and I didn't really have any direct involvement. I still believe in the franchise, and if we do more with it I will definitely get involved directly.

Capcom's output is very masculine in content – are female gamers in your target audience?
Well, the *Dead Rising* franchise is targeted mainly at the 'zombie mania' male. So, obviously they are in a minority, but if some females get that it would be great. You can't do anything in a half-hearted way – if you're going to do it, you have to do it full-on. These days, people are often offended by some of the things in games, but… life goes on, you know? [Laughs.] I don't think it's possible to overdo the blood. In fact, I think we should show more blood than actually exists inside the body!

"People are offended by some of the things in games, but I don't think it's possible to overdo the blood. In fact, I think we should show more blood than actually exists inside the body!"

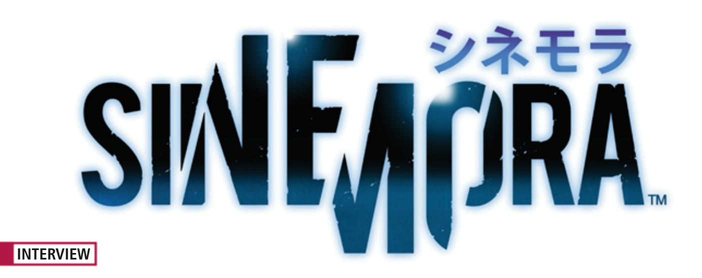
Iteration seems to be a big part of Capcom's development processes – what's the key to a successful sequel?
It's very simple. If a particular franchise or IP is continued by the creator, there is no problem. But in a large organisation that's not possible all the time. Therefore if you have to change the director or producer, etc, they would have to love the IP or franchise, including good points and bad points, as a whole. Without love, nothing happens.

Are you concerned that working with western studios might dilute Capcom's personality in some way?
On the contrary, I think it's important to mix the blood. If we had stuck to our guns and simply created titles that would only appeal to the Japanese domestic market, western fans would have deserted us a long time ago. By mixing our blood, but keeping Capcom's DNA, we won't get left behind.

How did you find working with a Canadian studio on *Dead Rising 2*?
We encountered huge cultural differences with Blue Castle. In the beginning, my team just couldn't get their heads around why something was being done in a particular way. The Japanese are very much process-oriented; although we are aiming for a common goal, if the process deviates from their way they wouldn't accept it. Every Friday evening, the Blue Castle guys have some beer in the office, and the Japanese team couldn't believe what was going on. Obviously, having beer at the end of the week is a carrot dangling in front of you to work hard for the week. In Japan, they've never been given a carrot before – they have to be whipped all the time. They just thought it must be a trap!

What do you think Blue Castle learned from working with the Japanese team?
When the management started to see Capcom's R&D and working around the clock they must have thought, 'This is too much – why should you do this?' But they started to accept that and to accommodate our timescale. I certainly don't wish for them to work the same hours, but they started to respect how we do things. Hopefully there is a compromise to be reached in the middle.





INTERVIEW

Bathroom philosophy

Goichi Suda has the designer jeans and the auteur back catalogue, so why is he always ending up in the lav?

We caught up with Grasshopper Manufacture's CEO **Goichi Suda** at Gamescom to talk about secret projects and new partnerships. While we were quite happy to stay by the bar, the man known as Suda51 was constantly being dragged off to the bathroom by camera crews. We found out what they wanted, and how his Shinji Mikami collaboration is faring.

What have you been up to since *No More Heroes 2: Desperate Struggle*?
I've been busy with EA projects.

It's been almost three years since the announcement of *Closer* – what's going on? Will you be revealing anything at TGS?
[Laughs] *Closer*? I don't know that name. It might take longer than that!





Goichi Suda (right), the man behind *No More Heroes* (above), has a closer relationship with the porcelain throne than most developers

How is work on the game progressing?
Nowadays, it's very difficult to make a game that's philosophical. I think part of the reason we've decided to work with Digital Reality [see facing page] for *Sine Mora* is that it allows a lot of creative freedom. And I think, with that freedom, you really can make a title – something like *Closer*.

A lot of Grasshopper's games are made via partnerships – why is that?
Grasshopper has worked with Japanese publishers as well as EA and for *Sine*, of course, a publisher from Hungary, Digital Reality, which is a rather classic or old-school publisher. But I think the reason why we're doing this is because we really want to make a game for a worldwide audience, and I think there are a lot of good people working in a lot of different publishers.

> "Nowadays, it's difficult to make a game that's philosophical. I think part of the reason we've decided to work with Digital Reality is that it allows a lot of creative freedom"

If we meet them and we have the same goal, we just start working and that's how we start a partnership. And so, in the end, the most important thing is to create a new game – more and more exciting games – and if a publisher allows us to do that, then we're more than happy to form a partnership.

Do you think you know how to make a game with worldwide appeal? Does anyone?
[Laughs] Maybe.

Do you feel there's a market in Japan for the games that Grasshopper makes?
I don't think that's the case. You know, I have an article in Famitsu specifically on western games and… in Japan, I think the fanbase for Western-style games is actually growing. I think these players want to have hardcore games as well. If you want to create a big game, it can't take too long… By collaborating with a company like Digital Reality [to make] a digitally distributed game, we can make more games at a faster pace. So if we do that and we're successful overseas, I think the Japanese market grows as well. So I think the important thing is to really release titles on a faster basis.

Finally, are you sick of being interviewed in the bathroom?
Actually, I think I'm the person who's been interviewed in the toilet the most in the world, so I am actually very proud of it – to be the number one. I think I'm at the top of six billion people as far as toilet interviews are concerned.



We don't quite get Grasshopper's logo either, but it surely echoes its philosophy to make "games that reflect the spirit of punk music: games that inspire and challenge norms"

Continue

Zombie dilemmas
Shotgun-pitchfork or wheelchair-tank?

Gamescom
You can't beat a bit of oompah, right?

The Belmonts
You name it, they'll kill it

Quit

Review events
But that's probably enough on that topic

Buying a new HDTV
We've finally narrowed it down to a choice of 49

RF inputs
Did we really ever connect consoles this way? *Really?*









A slew of Digital Reality's output, including RTS title *Desert Rats Vs Afrika Corps* and space exploration game *Haegemonia: Legions Of Iron*



Digital ambitions

We talk to the CEO of Digital Reality as it moves from realtime strategy developer to the cut-throat world of game publishing

Digital Reality (DR) used to develop niche PC games – the likes of *Imperium Galactica*, *Haegemonia* and *D-Day* – but Gamescom saw the announcement of a multigame publishing deal with Grasshopper Manufacture, the corporation headed by the influential Goichi Suda. We talk to **Andras Peller**, DR's CEO, about why, and where the company is going in the future.

Can you give us a potted history of DR?
We're almost 20 years old, and in the early days we were in smaller groups of people, doing one project every three years, usually – always space exploration titles for PC! And then those titles went a little bit niche market around 2001 and 2002. We made some RTS titles. The first one we made, *Afrika Corps*, was OK, we were happy about it. Of course, these games weren't *Age Of Empires*, or *StarCraft*, but they were pretty good.

We made other titles as well, but they were all work for hire. Over 17 to18 years, we did work for hire. A lot of publishers wanted to buy the studio, but we always said no, we wanted to keep our independence. It's very nice being independent, but without the money you're always struggling towards the next project, struggling for survival, and not doing what you want to do.

So you decided to become a publisher?
Yes, we had the idea to make ourselves publishers. It was a long process – I think it started in 2005 or 2006. We started to move the company in the direction of building structures, and building workflows to be more attractive to investors. We attracted an investor in Hungary – an internet empire guy – and we've been working with him since to make all our titles.



Andras Peller, CEO of Digital Reality, is excited about the company's move into self-publishing and away from "rigid" retail models

Who's that?
Actually, he likes to be in the shadows a little bit. That's his decision.

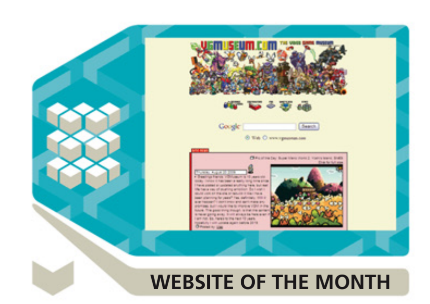
Is he investing in the whole concept or just individual games?
No, he's financing the whole company. I told him the idea of self-publishing games and he said: "OK, how much do you need?" I said a number and he said: "Oh, yeah, it's not a problem." We could publish many more titles, but we want to smoothly build up.

"You have to have a good idea, and good implementation, but what I like about digital distribution is that it's more about the idea and not about the quantity"

Will you be focusing on digital publishing?
Er, actually I don't think we are going to retail at all. Retail is very rigid, it's inflexible – it takes ages to make a game. And I like to be more flexible, fast and much more adaptive to the market.

Presumably, then, you're looking to get from concept to release in a short space of time.
From concept, maybe a little bit more than a year, but definitely not too much more, so maybe 15 to 19 months. But, for digital titles, you don't have to have as much content. You have to have a good idea, and good implementation, but what I like about digital distribution is that it's more about the idea and not about the quantity.

Why Suda and Grasshopper?
I think what I like most is the style. Everything in my life I'm attached to has a distinctive style, which is not general, not ordinary. Suda hasn't fallen into the big market. Everybody wants to make games more mainstream… They don't say: "OK, I'm going to the niche and I would like to serve this audience." So what I like in Suda most is that he has a distinctive style and he dares to keep that style, even if the big market is pushing it away. Being independent means that you can do what you feel is right and you don't have to do what's pushed on you by the market. That's what this is all about.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Chronicling videogames via the art of the screenshot, VGMuseum is a visual emporium of images old and new contributed by anyone who can hold the camera steady (or press Print Screen). It's the oldies that keep you hooked to the monitor for hours, whiling away the time by drooling over the rarest glimpses of videogame ghosts, including *Guilty Gear Petit* on WonderSwan Colour and even a glimpse of that rarest of NES beasts, *Stadium Of Events*. The down side is that the site itself isn't a patch on some of the eye candy it hosts, sporting an old-fashioned design that feels, perhaps appropriately, like the internet equivalent of an antique bookshop.

Site: VGMuseum
URL: www.vgmuseum.com



Kirby's Epic Yarn

FORMAT: **WII** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**



It's a material world for Mr Pink, who looks like filling the hole left behind by *Yoshi's Story* all those years ago. Whether the yarn in question will cover Kirby's pink head/bottom is unknown

Duke Nukem Forever

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**



It's taken forever and a day but it's finally on its way. New dev Gearbox, dual-wielded machine guns and giant alien enemies are good omens. But could it possibly live up to a decade of hype?

Dead Or Alive Dimensions

FORMAT: **3DS** PUBLISHER: **TECMO**



The first test of 3DS's analogue control will likely start here, with a spanking new *Dead Or Alive*. The series' easy-to-play, hard-to-master ethos should be a perfect fit for portable fighting

Star Wars: The Force Unleashed II

FORMAT: **360, DS, PC, PS3, WII** PUBLISHER: **LUCASARTS**



The *Unleashed* saga continues with more action than you could shake your saber at. Motion control would seem a perfect fit, but support for Kinect and Move is thus far unconfirmed

Crazy Taxi

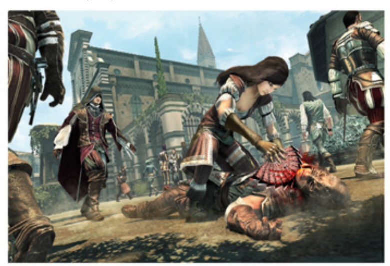
FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **SEGA**



Bright, bold and brilliant – on the heels of *Virtual-On, Crazy Taxi* continues the Sega download revival. Whether or not The Offspring's music will have aged quite as well is another matter

Assassin's Creed Brotherhood

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**



A year without an Ubisoft franchise entry wouldn't be right, and *Brotherhood* could bring the hide-and-stab genre back from *Thief*'s grave. The mortality rate of lookalikes will be high

Tron: Evolution

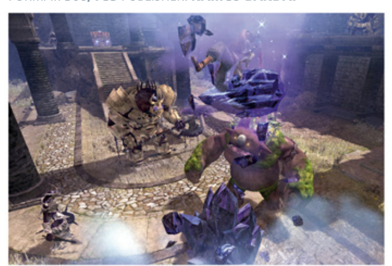
FORMAT: **360, DS, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **DISNEY**



Propaganda Games may not have a solid reputation for building on a franchise (see *Turok*), but the source material is ripe and relevant for current-gen experiments. Jumpsuits are optional

Majin And The Forsaken Kingdom

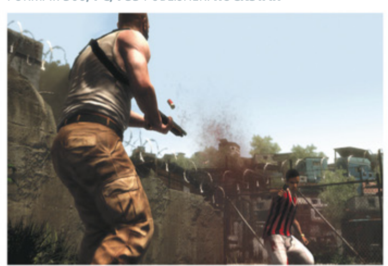
FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**



More lush action-adventure for the *Castlevania* and *Enslaved* crowd. *Majin*'s art direction is certainly piquing interest, and the dual-protagonist mechanic hasn't been done properly since *Ico*

Max Payne 3

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR**



It's looking likely Payne's first dive will be into an early 2011 release slot. Whenever it arrives, we're ready to see just what Rockstar can bring to the bullet-time genre Remedy pioneered



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

One Button Arthur

tinyurl.com/obarthur

Ninjadoodle follows up *One Button Bob* with a spiritual, medieval successor that's faster, cheekier and meatier.

Arthur runs towards certain death in a series of rooms designed to trick, tease and terrify anyone with less than lightning reactions. Counted clicks amount to your final score and it's this impetus that leads to constant replays in search of perfection (ghostly enemies can change positions, so don't bank on achieving greatness).

The intentional 8bit throwback design is the perfect match for the simple, unforgiving design, with a *Half-Minute Hero* level of nostalgia for a bygone era. There's a similar emphasis on timing, too, with switch rooms eliciting screams of frustration as you bounce Arthur off the walls in a bid to change his direction and avoid spiked walls.

Many of the clicks, such as charged jumps and coercing bats face-first into a bomb, are recycled from *Bob*, but they're all worthy bursts of gameplay that, when woven together, are a great, memorable way to while away five minutes.

Industry FOCUS

In association with Screen Digest

Survival of the friendliest

Steve Bailey looks at how social gaming is set to evolve in the face of environmental pressure

These past two years, gaming on social networks has moved very quickly indeed, evolving from an offshoot of the wider browser-based gaming scene into a critical focus of the app ecosystem for many of the major social networks. Underneath this disruption, and despite such nimble growth, the arc of how content and composition within social games have matured is a rather common one.

Early social games, the first generation, fell into two categories – throwaway widgets that rarely rose above silly distractions (such as friend-selling and quizzes) and were driven wholly by advertising, or menu-driven RPGs (such as *Mafia Wars*) that aped the long-standing content provided by such portals as Gameforge and Bigpoint, and monetised mainly through microtransactions. The former still exist, in dribs and drabs, entering and quickly leaving the top 200 games on Facebook, but never troubling the top-tier titles. The latter gave way, in part, to the second generation of social games, and the wave of content that spurred user figures to their early-2010 peak. The gameplay principles of accumulation and click-driven resource management have remained the same, but increased production values, interface refinements and depth of interaction have given way to titles such as *FarmVille*, *Hotel City* and myriad variations around such a structure. Sound familiar?

This year, Facebook has seen the kind of progression that's not too distant from what we've witnessed in traditional console and PC gaming

Compact timescale aside, the first half of 2010 on Facebook has seen the kind of progression that's not too distant from what we've witnessed in traditional console and PC gaming for many, many years. Visual quality has been upping in slickness, art styles are becoming more cogent, themes are branching out into specialised areas, and functionality is increasing. With this progression curve in mind, the next generation of Facebook titles is starting to appear in the second half of 2010, but there's perhaps a slower, steeper incline that it will need to tackle.

EA Playfish's *Hotel City* (above) is currently only to be found on Facebook, but with the migration of Zynga's *Mafia Wars* on to iPhone, can a hotel-management app be too far behind?



Games such as *Verdonia* and *Kingdoms Of Camelot* offer a deeper than usual SRPG experience for Facebook gamers, but how big can such titles get?

On Facebook, with viral distribution somewhat neutered and the now-established dominance of certain operators, it's becoming clear that converting free players into paying users is more vital to growth than simply accruing enormous followings. With this in mind, we're seeing deeper, fantasy-themed experiences – such as Playdom's *Verdonia* – emerging. Again, these aren't new games, and draw upon a long-existing heritage of browser-based gaming, where strategy RPGs have been a mainstay for most of the past decade. But the motivation is that while userbases may be smaller than the immense crowds that flocked to *FarmVille* et al, deeper connections to more complex play structures will lead to greater monetisation of users. If successful in this regard, it should prompt even more pre-existing MMOG and casual companies to enter social gaming, if only by dint of converting current IP.

However, the extent to which such games can scale may be limited, by the very mechanisms that allowed social gaming to flourish in the first place. One of the key reasons why the second generation of Facebook games bloomed is due to the manner in which they could wrap around a multitasking environment, integrating themselves into the suite of activities that users are there to perform – not just play games, but also communicate with friends,





Millionaire City (above) adds further layers to the resource-management template, demonstrating that social games can follow a path within a genre similar to traditional gaming

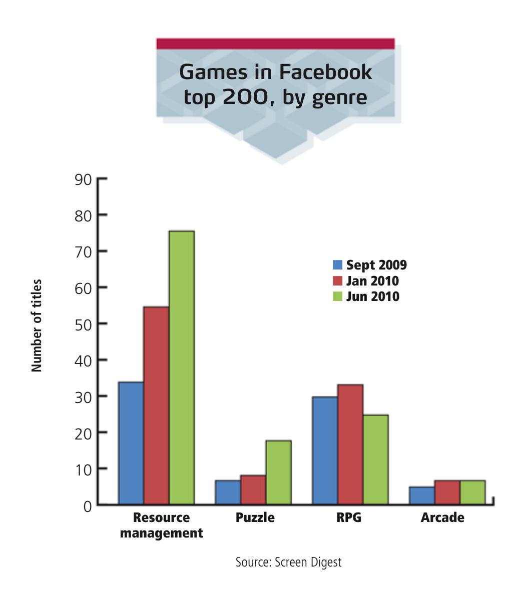
and perform other social upkeep. It's essentially a turn-based rather than realtime relationship, where tending to your farm/casino/hotel/pet becomes part of queue of social engagements. Asking such players to become more invested in games may be a tricky balancing act, with a low ceiling in place that obstructs many of those people that flocked to the defining titles of the past year.

Regardless of how this next generation plays out, the lifecycle of social games can be one of the most intense seen in videogames, outside of the ghetto-like realms of the multitude of disposable Flash gaming websites to be found in the open web. And so, if deeper strategy RPGs fail to gain sufficient foothold, it won't be long before another wave of content moves up to attempt to proliferate.

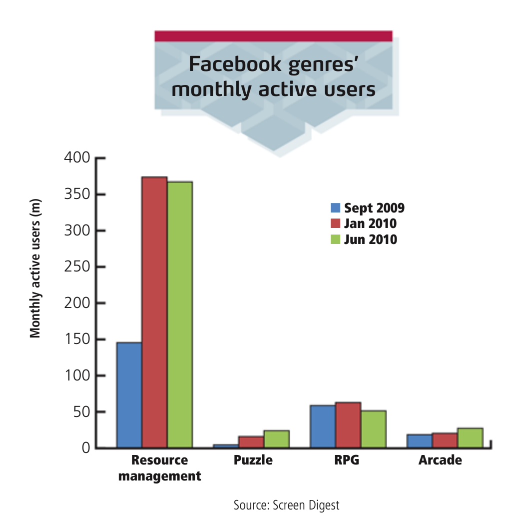
The innovations underpinning such waves will remain consistent, driven by leveraging of the immense matrix of relationships that social networks proffer; social graphs have always been an important aspect of gaming, more with each new hardware generation, culminating at a peak of connectivity with platforms such as Xbox Live. Casual gaming portals, too, have long seen social mechanisms as a powerful addition to their platform. Social networks disrupted this progression by turning the relationship on its head, introducing gaming to the most dynamic social structures in existence, rather than the other way around.

Looking further ahead points to another incoming trend for content, of which social games will likely be the spearhead: multi-network distribution platforms. For the past year, Facebook has been the 800lb gorilla that many eyes across the world have focused on, to the extent that many initially multi-network operators (such as Playfish, Zynga and Disney Playdom) have trained the bulk of their attentions upon it. This is reversing. Zynga, for example, is now looking to Apple's devices, Yahoo's gaming network and Japanese mobile social networks to fuel expansion. Taking content and operating it across a horizontal collection of platforms – rather than focussing on just one vertical outlet – is going to become increasingly important, much like how traditional thirdparty publishers have placed increasing accent on multiformat releases for their biggest franchises.

Major networks such as Facebook will still be seen as vital channels, but they will just be one component of operations as technology emerges to make social games increasingly agile propositions. In essence, social gaming will have gone full circle, having left behind dedicated gaming portals in order to evolve and hone its ability to address mass audiences within the confines of such platforms as Facebook, before once again attempting to court much larger swathes of the global online population at once.



Source: Screen Digest



Source: Screen Digest

SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

How not to sell games

Christophe Kagotani laments the state of the east/west marketing divide



"Is there anything that we can add to a project so it sells, like, 500,000 copies in Japan alone? A racing game, for instance."

Pardon me?

Western developers are doing well these days (I'm sitting with one as I write). They are in step with their own market, delivering the right content to their domestic audience. But even so, it's not always enough – especially when you consider specific genres. The North American market may be huge and important, but in order to survive you just can't ignore the other regions. Most of the time, the European market is seen as an extension of the US. Lately, however, Japan has been identified as an untapped market for HD gaming: a market that is opening up to western gaming culture. The current rise of the FPS is a sure sign of it.

Cultural differences won't disappear any time soon and not all companies are able to develop one universal piece of content for the whole market, but selling games in Japan is not such a crazy idea any more. Conversely, I believe you can't just dump your content on to the Japanese market without thinking it through. It just becomes a burden for the local marketing team. Localisation alone can't overcome all cultural, and certainly not gameplay, hurdles.

In my discussion with a western developer, I'm being asked if adding a famous local band to the soundtrack, a popular manga franchise for a decal on a car, or including some female idol would make it, all of a sudden, sell 500,000 copies when it used to sell no more than 20,000… Well, if such a thing was possible, I'd open an office and start getting rich advising companies – or write a bestseller called My Game Design Secrets.

In these difficult times, people in the industry in Japan are eager to meet you, especially when you know both cultures and have some experience. They like to share their latest great ideas on 'how to reach the westerners'.

It is not necessarily specific to Japan, but after nearly 20 years in the industry, you expect things to evolve for the better. I thought the Japanese industry would gain a better understanding of the west, but it seems things are not that simple.

Of course there have been exceptional companies curious enough to look around, learn and adapt, even create trends on a worldwide scale. But for the great majority it has always been the same. The days when I was invited to comment on the redesigned version of Lara Croft for the Japanese PlayStation weren't that long ago. It was assumed that retouching the face of the character would breach the wall of the Japanese market. I still encounter that kind of thinking today. A lot.

Western gamers love zombies, especially when they are Nazis. They are blood and violence obsessed. They love guns and military stuff. The bloodier a game is, the cooler it is. Don't underestimate the attraction of muscle cars either

Sometimes the naïvety reaches new heights: "Here is our new game that we think is quite appropriate for the western markets. You see, it is about an elite unit of the American army fighting



The modern iteration of Samus Aran (right) suits both east and west, but too often the attempts to export IP in both directions can feel hamfisted

vampires by night" (because they'd heard that Twilight was a success overseas). D'oh! Or another time: "We want to appeal to the west so here it is. It's a game featuring zombies." What am I supposed to say to that?

It is like watching a show on Animal Planet all about 'western gamers'. They love zombies, especially when they are Nazis. They are blood and violence obsessed. They love guns and military stuff. The bloodier a game is, the cooler it is. You can't underestimate the attraction of customised muscle cars and strong, sexy women either. Finally, don't try to do anything other than first- or thirdperson – and co-op is mandatory. Sandboxes and QTEs are strongly recommended.

Transforming a popular franchise into a totally different genre, like the thirdperson shooter, just because 'westerners like thirdperson shooters' is not the right approach. Getting as much blood as possible onscreen is also not the right approach. Equally, wanting to break the west by making an FPS, only to realise that it's too full of death and destruction, forcing you to add some comedy to lighten it up, is not the right approach. At all.

Giving a blank cheque to some average western developer (because the studio has experience with first- and thirdperson shooters) with little quality control is another recipe for disaster.

These are really depressing scenarios to be presented with, so you learn to stop making constructive comments, and I don't bother now. No one is going to ask me for anything, especially when they want to start talking money and profit. Suddenly, I'm not qualified enough, and definitely not cool enough. You are supposed to be 'friendly' – read that as contributing expertise for free.

In the current case at hand, I don't think they will give me any authority in the field of game design, and so there's no need to suggest anything. I could recommend a few great people in the field of racing games in Japan, but I know the person asking the questions isn't interested in anything other than a quick fix, a magic trick. So I close the issue right there with a curve ball: "Have you heard about this phenomenal group of female idols called AKB48? They have a massive impact on millions of otaku here in Japan – and especially abroad!"



Starring
Andy Serkis
(Lord of the Rings,
King Kong)
Co-written by
Alex Garland
(The Beach,
28 Days Later)
Music by
Nitin Sawhney
Ninja Theory
PS3
PlayStation Network
XBOX LIVE
XBOX 360
namco
BANDAI NAMCO Games

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

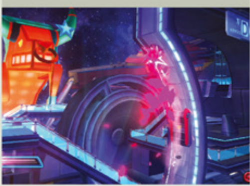
Edge's most wanted

The Legend Of Zelda: Skyward Sword



We've had another play in Link's pastel wonderland, and can't wait to find out how the structural changes pan out. Don't assume it's going to be the same old *Zelda*.
WII, NINTENDO

Sonic Colours



The most promising outing for the speedy blue one in some time, *Colours* is Sonic Team all over: bright, bold and fast as the hues work their special-ability magic.
DS, WII, SEGA

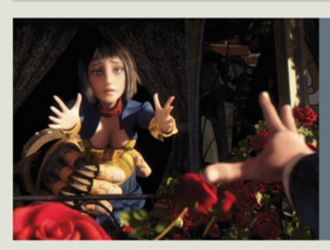
Need For Speed Hot Pursuit



The Autolog promises hours of fun with the ghosts of friends and foes hovering over your stats, while the secrecy surrounding the arsenal has us on the edge of our racing chairs.
360, PC, PS3, EA

Then and now

How much faith should we place in early reveals?



Infinite looks so good that we want it *now*. It's the art of the teaser, of course, but we can't help considering the games that have turned out radically different years after they were revealed

BioShock Infinite leaves us with our ears pricked up. From its majestic announcement trailer (see the preview on p32) to the moment we set eyes on the in-game world of Columbia, Irrational's game looks like it could be special indeed. Long wait, though: *BioShock Infinite* won't be released until 2012.

It's a stretch, and in terms of modern development it's an age. In recent years we've covered games that have changed radically from first look to the unwrapping of plastic, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Irrational's mighty *BioShock* made quite the debut, and in its final form retained the atmosphere of its first showings, though significant gameplay elements had been bolstered or refined.

But that's the past: everyone wants to know about *BioShock Infinite*. It's still in the melting pot at Irrational Games for two years of iteration and refinement, and the first in-game demonstration provoked more questions than answers. Credit where credit's due: it's a dynamite tease.

But it does make you wonder about which elements will prove to be the exciting ones. This series of interconnected floating structures – are they one big environment, or acting independently of each other? Are they destructible? Do the big fights always finish with the same destroyed bridges and collapsing towers? How does a city in the sky even go about falling apart? The answers fundamentally change your interpretation of the game.

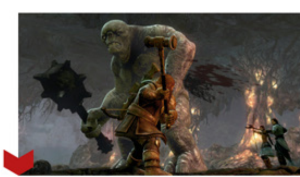
If Columbia is a physics-enabled playground you can roam on a massive scale, and in some ways terraform, then it's stunning. Either that, or *BioShock Infinite* is going to be just another FPS with brilliant set-pieces that runs at a breathless pace.

What we've seen so far literally brought the house down at every opportunity. If this type of action is player-driven, then *BioShock Infinite* has instantly taken the top spot on our Christmas 2012 lists. But even if this is how the game is set to be played *today*, it could so easily be different in two years' time. *BioShock Infinite* will be a constant presence on the radar until its arrival, but in terms of what to expect when it arrives, it's good to keep in mind that a lot can change within a couple of years in videogames.











FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **GUERRILLA GAMES**
ORIGIN: **THE NETHERLANDS**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E217**



Killzone.com

The *Killzone* community website is perfect for *Killzone 3*. It's a beautiful site, with a nod to Bungie.net of course, that doubles up as a general *Killzone* resource and a repository for all of the in-game stats. Your achievements, progress, online status and the like are shown, linked up to those of your friends – *Killzone 3*'s support for clans will make this a real hub, and for the game's offering of ranked practice games and leaderboards it's essential. As far as taglines go, though, 'Contribute to the *Killzone* franchise' is one of the least exciting we've heard in a while.

Killzone 3

Will it be third time lucky for Guerrilla's sci-fi shooter, or just your average 3D FPS?

Guerrilla Games doesn't like the word '*Halo*'. We've just finished playing multiplayer in the first *Killzone* that has a shout of matching up to Bungie's FPS work. "You must be a *Killzone 2* veteran?" asks Guerrilla's representative. We explain that our skills were mostly honed in the Chief's company. Instant shutdown: "They are very different types of game, you know."

It's not a bad series to be compared with, we reckon. *Killzone 3*'s classes and choose what you want first. The careers either integrate into the 'normal' game or change it: you can just have a character with a bit more health, or choose a jetpack to introduce a vertical axis.

We picked medic. Forget altruism – this guy's got a personal minidrone. Because medics need to be doing non-combat things in the midst of battle, and often have their back turned, the minidrone floats around his body and shoots anything that gets close.

> Multiplayer in Killzone 3 is as gorgeously detailed as singleplayer, and drooling at the wall textures puts you at real risk of succumbing to a backstab

Halo: Reach's new powers are subtle differentiations, but the broad brush strokes are the same: team deathmatch with plenty of guns and variants. Guerrilla's multiplayer structure is carried over and supplemented from *Killzone 2*: 45 ranks to progress through, more than 100 'medals' to be won, and a round-based ribbon system (for things such as a double kill in a match).

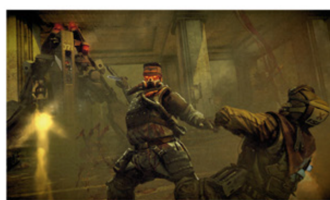
You're constantly unlocking things, in other words, including the weapons and skills of your chosen 'career' – there are five, each with six weapons and six abilities, and as you earn the unlock points you can The power isn't huge, but the distraction value is immense – both early warning system and irritant – and it's a practical, distinctive tool.

So let's put it to use. Multiplayer in *Killzone 3* is as gorgeously detailed as singleplayer, and drooling at the wall textures and incidental scraps strewn around the place puts you at real risk of succumbing to a backstab. The maps have all of the architectural quirks you'd expect for deathmatch, crammed with cubby holes, stretching across sniper-friendly roads – and they're extremely layered, with inclines and falls everywhere. But we're not here for the architecture.

Is that a mech suit over there? Minidrones are all well and good, but thoughts of healing are obscured by the barrel of an enormous cannon. Both teams get one of these beasts at their spawn point on certain maps, and we're in that cockpit in a flash. The elevated view allows a much broader look over the battlefield, and strafing onrushing foes sees our kill count grow rapidly. When you add in the rockets that can be fired every few seconds, it seems almost unfair.



The persistence of *Killzone 3*'s multiplayer is significantly differentiated by its team features: a squad-specific HUD that shows the details of your team, such as class, and a rewards system that doles out team trinkets















Teams really have to work to take out a threat like this, and individual heroes all pay the price. Because we're playing a King Of The Hill variant, the distraction value is as valuable as the kills, and our team romps home. It's not on every map, but the mech suit's a great alternative to transport vehicles: it gives your team a heavy weapon that can be the backbone of your force or just an almighty pain in the enemy rear.

More straight-up shooting is to be had in Objective, a bomb-the-base mode in which the best players are featured in short bookend cutscenes that either change the level or end the match – hardly revolutionary, but a cute addition. There's still something that feels a little rigid about *Killzone*'s reticule to us, but there's no denying its precision. These weapons feel really good, a chunky rattle with every burst. In among the carnage we discover the new melee animations triggered when an opponent doesn't notice your presence – gory flourishes that appear to be this season's must-haves.

There are lots of smarter touches, too. Guerrilla Warfare, which is team deathmatch, always spawns you with your team, and the default movement speed feels a tad quicker. Offline bots (which most games of this ilk don't even consider) have been paid considerable and commendable attention.

The *Killzone* franchise was always going to be Sony's mega-FPS, a destiny perhaps thrust upon it. *Killzone 3*'s multiplayer is structured impeccably and clearly has legs, while our previous time with the singleplayer and stereoscopic 3D modes leave us in no doubt about the its capability as a spectacle. In other words, then, this is looking like the first game in the franchise to live up to that mega-FPS label.

***Killzone 3* doesn't just transplant the mechanics of the series into a new scenario, it ups the scale and challenge considerably. *Killzone 2*'s multiplayer required as much kamikaze as careful planning in some of its modes, and this is an aspect that's been acknowledged – if not removed – by the presence of the team HUD this time around**

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **IRRATIONAL GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2012**

Bioshock Infinite

Irrational Games' next fantastical elsewhere story heads to the skies, hoping to find the heart of America





The powers of Elizabeth (main) are at the centre of a conflict in Columbia, which is why they're so keen that an outsider like yourself butts out. She seems to be the focal figure of the city itself, and you'd bet is a big part of how its racial politics have worked out. The subtext of everything in Columbia's regime is master race ideology, with hints about eugenics. Combined with the body modification and genetic tampering going on, it could go in all sorts of tantalising directions

Ask people what they most remember about *BioShock*, and a lot of the answers will be one word: Rapture. A gorgeously concepted and crafted city under the sea, its imaginative punch has yet to be matched in this generation's FPS games. Throughout *BioShock* and *BioShock 2*, it is an all-encompassing presence that frames everything you do. Perhaps that's why its creator, Irrational Games, has left.

Bioshock Infinite has switched water for air, the gloomy depths and cramped confines of the sea floor for the eye-assaulting brightness and endless space of the skies. This new dystopia is Columbia: a floating city of interconnected tower blocks, held aloft by whirring fans and canvas balloons, rising and falling to the rhythm of flames.

Even in the brief walkthrough we were treated to, it's clear the team has done it again. Columbia's a bewilderingly structured and entirely wonderful spectacle, its nouveau curves and apartments founded on stolid industrial contraptions that keep everything aloft. It's like a candy cane with a spine of steel, while the occasional glimpse of just what's below (a cloud canopy and a drop of miles) is vertiginous.

Irrational calls it a culmination of the 19th century's innovations – electricity, telephones, and movie stars – all jumbled into a giant 'best of' America. Unlike Rapture, it's not a secret: Columbia was a showpiece. It disappeared 12 years ago. You play Booker DeWitt, a Pinkerton agent (hired thug) employed by someone who knows where it is – and sent there to get a woman named Elizabeth away from it. So the lead has a name and a defined mission, unlike *BioShock*, whose protagonist Jack is rather unkindly dismissed by our hosts as a 'mindless cipher'.

The similarities are still obvious, and this is an amazing world for a narrative-led FPS. The walkthrough begins on cobbled streets, and its early mood-setting is familiar: a clearly mechanical horse clanks past, pulling an empty carrier, while a real horse lies dead in the street being pecked by crows. A housewife sweeps the porch as her home burns in the background. Soon there's the sound of ranting, coming from a preacher who shouts about the value of personal arms next to buckets filled with guns and scrawled 'take arms' signs. Accepting the offer triggers the first battle, as the preacher's face contorts and his eyes turn red, before he launches a flock of crows at DeWitt and calls for 'Charles'.

There's a brief firefight, and the unfortunate Charles is bashed off the edge by Booker before the preacher flees on an overhead set of rails called the 'skyline'. Booker drinks from an abandoned bottle marked 'Murder of Crows' to gain the power used by the preacher, setting up the one-two punch combat familiar to the series. This

> Columbia's a bewilderingly structured and entirely wonderful spectacle, its nouveau curves and apartments founded on stolid industrial contraptions



Booker uses a natty hook to zip along the skyhook – a giant overhead rail spanning two towers. Judging by their placement between buildings that independently float, you can switch across them as well

On the trail

BioShock Infinite's teaser is one of the best we've seen. There's a great sense of theatre: a slow pan through a fishtank, and a familiar theme apes the first _BioShock_ teaser, before Booker is literally thrown into Columbia. It's July 4, the Grand Old Flag (one of America's more tubthumping national anthems) is playing from a gramophone as a conductor mimes in front of it, telekinesis is visualised by a whoosh of red roses, church towers rise in the distance, the stars and stripes waves from every flagpole, and DeWitt falls to his doom past it all. It's like an HG Wells version of Americana, and a delicious taster – sadly, one you'll need to keep you going until 2012.

time around, the powers seem less like a fistful of lightning and more like a screenful. They are more sensory weapons as well, seeming to change the whole tenor of a scene visually and aurally – though whether this is simply inspired art direction or a key part of their utility is unclear. The promise of *BioShock*'s weapon set was one of experimentation, one that was never truly realised unless the player forced it. What the concept could do in this huge play area with destructible, floating buildings is a mouthwatering proposition.

DeWitt soon finds his way to a bar, and a fight – but one that only begins after the patrons have considered him for a few tense moments, which is a subtle touch. He shows off another power, levitating a shotgun from an assailant's grip, turning it around in the air and blasting the man's face, before pulling the gun into his own hands. The fight spills outside, Elizabeth turns up, you fry the remainder in an electric storm aided by the lady, who's exhausted from her effort, and then the big man shows up.

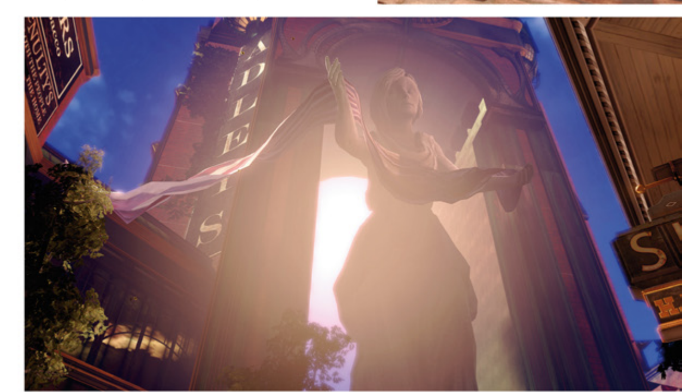
The Big Daddy figure this time around is currently referred to as the 'alpha' or 'handyman'. The porcelain fingers of his giant hand are a terrifying replacement for the Big Daddy's more straightforward drill, and where there should be a face there's instead what looks like a heart, fed by or feeding metal tubes that suspend it in space. The dysmorphia and weird combo of biology and rivets is bad enough; the intelligence implied by sadism and the intricate animation is terrifying.

The one we see in action is a wrecking ball, relentless and totally at ease in Columbia's more open environments, moving like a blur at times. Eventually, with Elizabeth's help, a bridge's support crashes down on him and, as the bridge itself collapses, he tries to clamber free, only to meet DeWitt's boot. After this, a similar figure, but one styled more like a gargoyle, lands on a nearby roof before sweeping in for a cutscene, ending our demo.

From first to last, our walkthrough is a masterclass in production, to the extent that it could be a standalone video. That makes you wonder just how representative its beats are of what we'll eventually be playing – but also showcases tremendous potential. If there's one criticism of Rapture, it's that only rarely did you feel people had actually lived in the places you were shooting through. Columbia's biggest challenge will be to feel right in a setting that's, if anything, even more fantastical than Ryan's utopia. It's no small task. But *Infinite* has barely showed its hand – and this showing emphasised only its evolution of setting and series standards. As it breaks cover, we're eager to find out about what will really make or break *Infinite* – the differences.



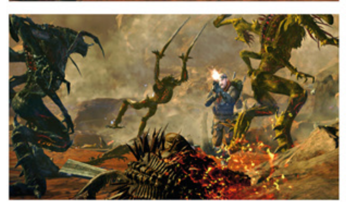
The implication of 'alphas' and the general thread of eugenics and fascism running through _BioShock Infinite_ suggests a tempting progression: a _BioShock_ where the Big Daddy figure isn't dumb and brutalised muscle but the pick of the gene pool, augmented and running the whole show











There's a distinct flavour of *Dead Space* in the insectoid nature of the enemies. Whether this sci-fi twist will gel with the series' grass-roots theme is another matter

Red Faction: Armageddon

Volition makes a return to Mars, and to hardcore destructibility, but from a welcome new perspective

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **VOLITION, INC**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MARCH**

Red Faction: Guerrilla was a shot in the arm for an unfancied franchise, and its spectacular destructible environments made it a dark horse in last year's gongs. So it's to developer Volition's credit that, rather than resting on those laurels, *Armageddon* takes the key selling point of Big Chunky Destruction into a different subgenre: the orange panoramas of Mars have morphed into a claustrophobic thirdperson shooter.

Once again, the ghost of *Dead Space* is invoked (you could write an article by now on the influences of Visceral's game). *Armageddon*'s atmosphere and viewpoint are heavily influenced by Isaac Clarke's adventure, but that's not to say it's without its own character. Set in a subterranean network beneath Mars, the environments are much larger and more interactive than in comparable games, and a neat differentiator is the placement of structures on walls and ceilings. And, naturally, collapsing them is given as much prominence as ever. The most fun way to do this is with a magnet gun, which works in the same way as its ilk in *Just Cause 2* and *Crackdown 2* – except here you can rip enemies through buildings, pull down huge rocks or cause two gigantic structures to topple themselves on to a massive army. By narrowing the playing field for destruction, *Armageddon* invites it to be used more creatively than before: there are plenty of other ways to demolish things beyond the magnet gun. It sometimes feels like a tower collapses if you sneeze.

But fear not, hippies: you can also make everything right again with the repair gun. Point and fire its soothing blue beam and ruined objects reassemble themselves – walling off a particularly large group of enemies, closing up a shipping crate for a breather or pulling up the rubble just as foes run across it. Real men have the option of the black hole gun, creating a vortex that violently pulls in debris and nearby enemies, crashing them into each other. By the time the hero climbs into a Red Faction Leo battlesuit and begins railgunning small enemies, sending homing rockets after the big ones, and sprinting through buildings, you've got to admit that it looks like an awful lot of fun. When magic is added to the mix, sparking off stasis fields that lift up the enemies like ragdolls before they're magnet-gunned to a truck, the entire proposition only becomes more appealing.

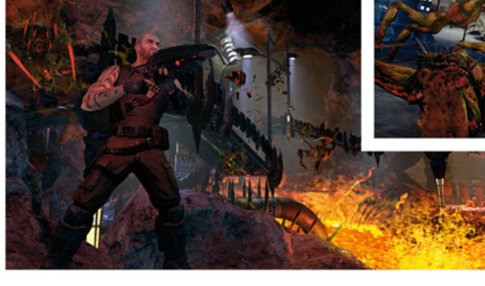
The only flat note of this early look is the opposition itself, an unimaginative bunch. There are the creepers, small and agile melee attackers. There are the ravagers, which throw lightning bolts. And then there's another one, whose name we didn't catch, that's an acid-spitting insectoid. These crunch satisfactorily, but you do get the impression you've seen them somewhere before.

That aside, *Red Faction: Armageddon* looks like an inspired evolution from *Guerrilla*. The destruction in an open world sometimes felt a little aimless in such a sprawling environment, but the focus in *Armageddon*'s thirdperson switchup could be the making of it. With a dash more spice to its enemies and their looks, this could be more than another dark horse.

Brand Echh

***Red Faction: Battlegrounds* is a downloadable multiplayer arena shooter that's "very DLC-based, all about the world", according to a THQ spokesperson. It's not inspiring stuff: downloadable titles can be simple, but this looks like you've seen everything in the first minute. A more successful expansion of the world may be *Red Faction: Origins*, an animated movie produced by Syfy, based on the property and scheduled for March next year. Add the usual slew of books, comics and hoodies come the release date of *Armageddon* and, though we're suckers for *Red Faction*'s destruction as much as anyone, it does make you wonder who's buying this stuff.**

Armageddon is building on the strengths of the series' previous thirdperson reinvention. Vehicles – though not a highlight of _Guerrilla_ – are promised for the multiplayer mode



It's a much more gruesome affair this time around, shootouts in enclosed spaces providing a much more immediate and intense thrill than _Guerrilla_'s more open areas afforded. How well the array of world-bending weapons copes in small spaces will be the true test





Even when he slips out of the prison uniform, Saejima (below and left) is certainly the worst-dressed of the cast. His story offers a counterpoint to Kazuma's own: he's jailed for the murders of rival yakuza gang members



Yakuza 4

Kazuma gets company in a return to the mean streets



Still living in his secluded orphanage at the outset of *Yakuza 4*, Kazuma is as ever destined to be dragged back into the dark side of Tokyo, his story intersecting with those of the newer members of *Yakuza*'s cast

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **CS1 TEAM**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), 2011 (US, UK)**

Yakuza 3, for much of its length, left the grimy, neon-lit haze of the series' familiar Tokyo backstreets behind, and concentrated instead on long-standing series protagonist Kazuma Kiryu's attempts to achieve inner peace through fostering large batches of children at his beach-side orphanage. *Yakuza 4* marks a multifaceted return to more traditional series territory. Not content with giving us a good look at the Japanese capital's underbelly through the eyes of a snappily dressed mobster, *Yakuza 4* has added three new characters. Does this mean that Kazuma's story has been told?

"I think it's fair to say we've told a lot of his story," says producer **Masayoshi Kikuchi**. "The idea, in *Yakuza 4*, was to give a realistic portrayal of the Tokyo underground community." Structurally the game remains unaffected by the presence of an ensemble cast – it's still a JRPG grind through a never-ending series of *Streets Of Rage* style fistfights, but rather than simply bringing to the game their own unique stories and thematic concerns, the new playable characters grant players the opportunity to try out three new flavours of brawling.

The first new standpoint is provided by Shun Akiyama, a Tokyo moneylender with strong ties to the city's homeless – the level we play involves clearing out a yakuza-infested abandoned building on behalf of its down-and-out inhabitants. With his dirty, creased red suit and unshaven features, he looks like Kazuma after a heavy night on the sake, and, fittingly, his fighting style is the most immediately familiar of the bunch. He does, however, seem to favour kicks over punches when possible (one of his combos leads into a blurred flurry of blows which is unmistakably Chun-Li's lightning kick).

Harder to get to grips with is escaped convict Taiga Saejima – or almost-escaped convict when we're introduced to him. A prison-yard brawl with the guards in what appears to be a breakout gone awry is the setting in which we get to try his slower, more heavily grapple-based approach to combat. At first, the lack of reach to his kicks and jabs is frustrating, and it's not until one of the guards drops a baton that we're able to even the odds.

Rounding out *Yakuza 4*'s expanded roster is Tokyo vice cop Masayoshi Tanimura, a fresh-faced pretty boy when compared to the craggy, prison-aged Saejima. Bringing the series another step closer to the Tokyo thrillers that inspired it, Tanimura fights like a brutal martial artist, dropping thugs with arm-twisting, bone-snapping takedown manoeuvres.

Tanimura's battle is perhaps the most exciting of those we play, involving a frankly ludicrous number of thugs pouring in to dank, dockland arena, but it's the variety itself that intrigues. With the played-out Kazuma-against-the-world themes of *Yakuza 1* through to *3* now tempered by a feisty supporting cast, *Yakuza 4* looks like a return to gangland form, reviving the air of high drama and low life that was such a potent mix on PS2.





Combat retains its exaggerated, self-consciously gamey visual flourishes, contrasting heavily with the brutality going on beneath the kaleidoscopic colours. One particularly brutal finisher involves repeatedly slamming a foe's head into a wall



Rumble in the (urban) jungle

Yakuza 4 complements its new ensemble cast with Battle Mode, a traditional training option allowing the busting of heads without the concern of the main story. It shows off the divergent fighting styles of each new character, but is also in danger of highlighting the quite shallow fighting mechanics. In funnelling the experience into such a concentrated space – without narrative motivation – Battle Mode is both relentless and potentially wearying. Fortunately, the main story looks set to reignite the spark dampened by *Yakuza 3*'s beachside excursions.

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **WARNER BROS**
DEVELOPER: **SNOWBLIND STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2011**

The Lord Of The Rings: War In The North

In which Middle-earth plays host to loot drops, levelling, and thwacking good action



Set in the background of the main Lord Of The Rings plotline, *War In The North* allows the dev team a little more licence with events than something based squarely on the books







The 'north' of Middle-earth seen in the game is a land that reminds us of the battle against the Germans in the forest at the beginning of Gladiator (which was filmed in Surrey)

It's not like we're short of chances to frolic around Middle-earth: from *Aragorn's Quest* for the kids to the F2P rebirth of *LOTR Online*, via RTS and handheld sidestreets, many genres have felt the gaze of Sauron. But such is the power of the licence that certain elevator pitches just work. *Baldur's Gate* meets the War Of The Rings? Yes, please.

War In The North comes from Snowblind Studios, developer of the excellent *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* on GameCube/PS2/Xbox. It's an action-RPG focused on co-op with three classes to choose from – normally we'd automatically expect the rest of the Fellowship's roles to be 'revealed', but Snowblind claims it's working on *WITN* as a specifically threeplayer experience.

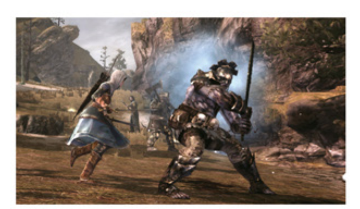
So you can be a dwarf, an elf or a human, and as Sauron's armies march towards the north, doing dreadful deeds, it's all about smashing them to pieces. *War In The North* fuses loot 'em up with nasty and brutish combat. In practice, it looks suspiciously like our demo's being driven by simply pressing Y lots of times in standard hack'n'slash fashion, but there are definitely some grisly outputs onscreen (though there's something comic about an orc being disembowelled as 'Legendary Kill' flashes up as in some kind of brutal gameshow).

Several orcs are dispatched with neat finishers, the elf lady's knife carving throats nicely. Eventually an orc champion turns up with a few regular buddies, and in a sudden switch to MMOG-style mechanics, one of the characters has to 'tank' the champion while his comrades kill the little ones. When the leader's the only one left, the characters in your party gang up, nipping in and landing blows before dodging out, filling up a bar reminiscent of *FFXIII*'s Stagger system; when this is topped, the champion can be too. The elf slits his throat with brutal efficiency.

Finally, some trolls arrive. The same mechanic applies, except these are so much bigger that they'll grab characters and attempt to simply pull them apart; if this happens, teammates have to step in or the unfortunate victim is doomed. It takes a bit too long for a troll to actually do the ripping to seem threatening, but presumably this will scale with your own skills. To be fair, it definitely creates the sense the characters are fighting something four times their size and strength. The trolls take enormous beatings, launch more than one of the party flying across the battlefield, and only go down with the nastiest of finishers.

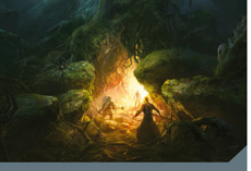
Outside of combat the three characters have different abilities. The elf can see tracks where the other characters can't, which we're told will encourage voice chat. The dwarf's ability is similar – he can see 'structural weaknesses', which means sections of wall that can be bashed down to unearth treasure. The human, somewhat disappointingly, collects herbs.

They are all part of a metagame we're yet to see, however, and at this stage *War In The North* has a lot to get the more bloodthirsty fans of Tolkien's world excited. The original movie tie-ins went some way to replicating the violence of the films, but never went quite as far in their brutality – it's a side of Middle-earth not friendly to age ratings, after all. With a little more inventiveness, and a structure that makes loot work as a persistent part of online on consoles, *War In The North* could be much more than a mere brand expansion.





The level of violence is higher than we've seen in previous Lord Of The Rings games. Think of the gory bits involving orcs in the movies and you're almost there



Loot me up

During downtime in the demo, characters were exploring caves, smashing down walls and greedily selecting all from treasure chests. Veterans of any loot RPG know the magical thrill to be had in amassing vast stores of stuff, and *War In The North* is full of opportunities to collect items, and a yet-unseen crafting system. This is all in aid of being able to customise and upgrade your character – who's also levelling up throughout. A neat touch here is the ability to pay online comrades in experience points, though whether this is a kind of bounty system or simply a slider for establishing your selfishness remains to be seen.



Though your job is to free minds from the prison of The Ministry, you'll brighten up shop fronts and release them from their shutters – since when has consumerism been an opponent of capitalism?



Shaun White Skateboarding

Ubisoft swaps pearl-white snow for cement-grey streets in its latest boardwalk

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3, WII**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTREAL**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER 1**

The personality of skateboarding culture, the throwaway attitude and anti-establishment, live-free ethos, has been the prism for games about urban adventures on wheels since Tony Hawk strutted his ska-punk stuff around town. Never before, however, has it been so explicitly juxtaposed with the 'real world' of modern living in the way that it has here. The world of *Shaun White* is a bleak one, its inhabitants brainwashed by The Ministry, an Orwellian organisation that keeps its briefcase-carrying victims prisoners in their own heads. Skateboarding, along with anything else presumed to be subversive, is outlawed. It's your job as White's accomplice to splash a little colour on the scene.

Grinding, kick-flipping and grabbing your way around town emits a pulse of creativity from your rebel with a board. Mounds of cement become impromptu ramps, graffiti is unleashed on walls, and monochrome businessmen become jeans-wearing chill-factories, spouting slogans and swaggering around town. It's a black-and-white modern world redeemed by skateboarding culture, and it's a neat device that enables Ubisoft Montreal (which previously worked on White's snowboarding title, dual-athlete that he is) to give meaning to your moves.

Anywhere on the map can be coloured in, from plants and trees ready to bloom *Okami*-style into life to greyed-out railings that need sprucing up. Crucial progress-enhancing areas are outlined in thick colour and are your main aim. Activate these sectors and the rewards can be anything from tutorials and abilities to a new cap and kicks for your wardrobe. Your supernatural ability is predictably labelled Flow, and using it on certain rails and ramps draws them to life as your board grinds the preset path. You're a passenger rather than a driving force, and momentum is the key. Such sections require the traditional left/right analogue balancing the genre is accustomed to, and is just one example of a control scheme Ubisoft Montreal has struggled to brand its own. So perfected has the skateboarding genre's system of dual-analogue control become, with EA's *Skate* currently top of the pile for feedback and intricacy, that *Shaun White*'s story and world are the only tools left for a team of newcomers to innovate. And that's no disparagement: Montreal has brought something genuinely new to a genre that, as typified by *Hawk*'s recent trials, has struggled to pick a direction and roll with it.

If anything, *Shaun White* is harkening back to the bold, cartoon flavours of *Hawk*'s earliest, greatest adventures, and while that brings with it some shallowness, it keeps things fast, fun and – in keeping with *White*'s apparent social manifesto – open to everyone.



The environments are big and solid, with enough NPCs wandering around to make it feel populated but not compromise your view. The lack of collision detection on these citizens is a blessing, enabling you to roll around the town with ease

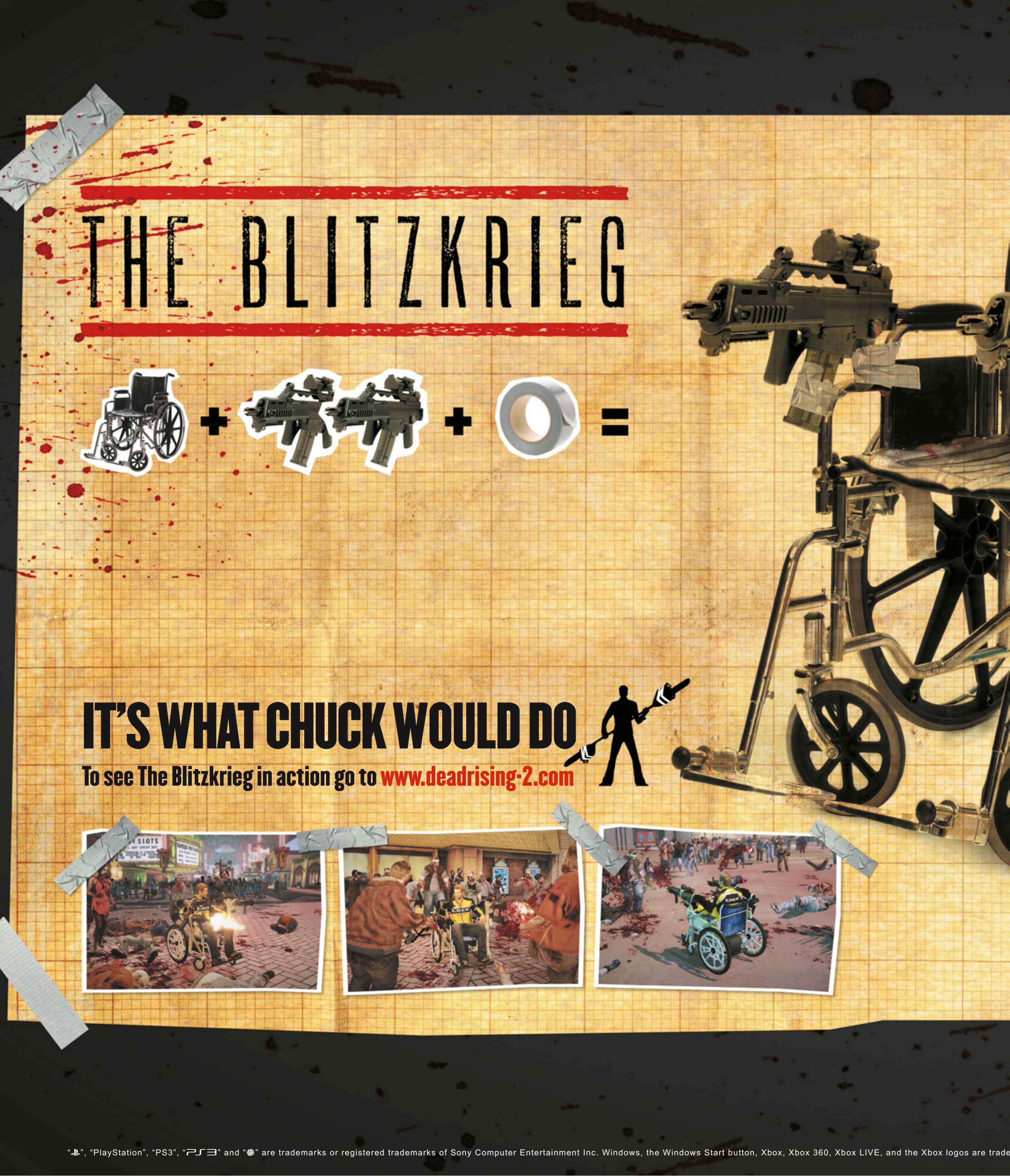


White's early appearance is restricted to a cameo as he imparts his trusted, life-giving board to you from his lonely cell within The Ministry. The opening cinematic takes place in firstperson as a *Riddick*-style walkthrough



Shaun to life

The second major section of the game's opening is a skate park previously owned by Shaun's pal, Bob. In a terrible twist of fate, Bob's park has been rendered civil and characterless by the fascistic Ministry. Your role is to paint the park back to life by skating ramps and grinding rails. Restoring the area to its previous glory is a pleasure rather than a chore. The game is quick to reward even the most subtle tricks, allowing smooth progress that lets you get the most out of the simple, functional controls (left stick for movement, right stick for tricks).


THE BLITZKRIEG
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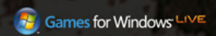


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Air strikes can be called in from your headquarters once you've built the requisite satellite uplink, but can also be earned as rewards for completing mini-objectives on the battlefield. Knowing when to deploy your best skills is crucial

End Of Nations

The MMORTS that aims to 'pull the genre out of the '90s'

FORMATS: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **TRION WORLDS**
DEVELOPER: **PETROGLYPH GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2011**

There are genres that lend themselves more easily to massively multiplayer adaptation than the RTS – ones that don't involve all the units and calculations that 51 simultaneous generals are sure to generate. But Petroglyph Games' president **Mike Legg** thinks that the time has come to "pull the RTS out of the '90s", and that his studio, appropriately founded by Westwood refugees, can meet the challenge.

Set in a future when the global economic crisis has led to the fatal destabilisation of the world's regions, *End Of Nations* pits its players against a tyrannical superpower called the Order of Nations. This constitutes the dominant PvE element, though PvP is naturally well catered for as well. The game imagines immense battles, with up to 51 people and their respective armies coming together against giant, *Supreme Commander*-esque super-enemies and sprawling, tank-spewing bases.

For a genre that has only ever attempted twoplayer cooperative before, this is a formidable challenge, but *End Of Nations* cloaks its ambition in familiarity. It looks like any other modern top-down RTS you've seen, with colour-coded unit classification and an action bar at the bottom of the screen bristling with strategic options. However, the game also has classes, levels and skills, all of which determine which units and offensive techniques you're able to bring with you on to the battlefield.

At launch there will be three classes – Tank, Auxiliary and Strike. They all have access to every unit in the game, but their battlefield skills differ, making it advisable to team up with commanders of different classes for raids. Each player has a persistent headquarters, where experience points can be spent on satellite uplinks or landing strips to open up new unit types and strike capabilities. Units themselves can be earned, scavenged, crafted or bought from other players, and you can customise them once they're yours – though there are the usual difficulties with allowing players to upload their own custom decals.

Legg believes that being able to play with your friends within the context of a massively multiplayer title is crucial, and *End Of Nations* has a wealth of social features built in, so that you can keep track of and communicate with other players (see 'Situation room'). Unit point limits for each map bridge the often impassable gulf between higher- and lower-level players – playing on a 100-point map with a friend, an experienced player would have to choose between one or two super-powerful units, or an army of lesser ones.

End Of Nations is in pre-alpha at the moment, with a planned launch in 2011, but its ideas are fully formed. The essential elements of any MMORPG are persistence, customisation and, of course, value; it will be interesting to see how *End Of Nations* generates enough content to prevent its commanders from retiring after the initial two or three months.



We only saw ground units in this pre-alpha code, but we're promised they'll diversify. Your strategic choices aren't limited to which troops you bring into the field, but which skills to line up on a bar that will appear on the right of the screen





The only map available at this point was a stormy plain dotted with burnished steel bases – a little drab, but it shows off the weather effects nicely. As *End Of Nations* is rooted in the real world, the battlefields are unlikely to get too fantastical

Situation room

Zoom out from the battlefield in *End Of Nations* and you'll find yourself in the War Room, the game's detailed menu interface. Different screens will show scenes and stats from battles that are currently raging – you can drop in and observe any battle in realtime – against the backdrop of a constantly updating world map. Meanwhile, tickers across the top and bottom of the screen deliver instant news from your friends list and your guild, keeping you constantly connected with the other players in your social circle.

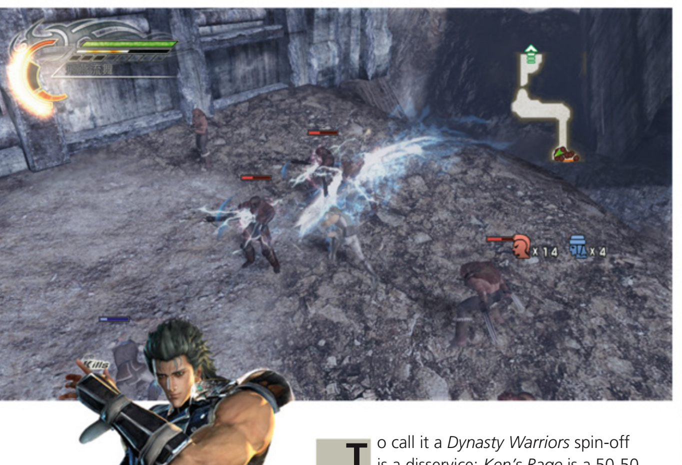


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FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **TECMO KOEI**
DEVELOPER: **OMEGA FORCE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**

Fist Of The North Star: Ken's Rage

Hundred-hand slaps and crazy kung-fu killers from the Dynasty Warriors collective





The AI enemies are punching bags there to make up numbers and make you feel special. They're prey rather than equals, occasionally challenging you by jumping in to rescue one of their own



Dude looks like a lady

Mamiya's first boss encounter is with cross-dressing goliath Juda, bent on her destruction and the improvement of his/her own appearance. Juda is just one character lifted from the source material, and it has been done with great authenticity. How deep into the journeys of the characters *Ken's Rage* will go remains to be seen, but there's already more sense of story and motivation than some of the hollow narratives of *Dynasty Warriors*. Previous games based on the series have been wafer-thin in terms of paying dues to writer Buronson's epic.

To call it a *Dynasty Warriors* spin-off is a disservice: *Ken's Rage* is a 50-50 blend of the '80s manga/anime and Omega Force's trademark hack/slash principles. A post-apocalyptic world of deranged *Fallout* rejects – and some of the most eccentric, steroid-enlarged bosses you'll see this side of an Itagaki cutscene – lets Omega Force off the leash of its usual semi-realist historic settings, granting a licence for more intricate combat systems to dispense with 100-man crowds. All in one sweet flurry of a combo, of course.

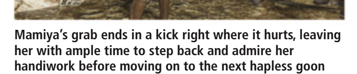
Legend mode offers three characters in the build we got to grips with. Each of the three stories takes place in a different strand of the over-arching narrative, crossing over in the tradition of the source material and providing enough short, sharp bursts of pulpy story to keep you punching. Main man Kenshiro, mini-skirted Mamiya and crouching killer Rei round out the roster with unique fighting styles and some context-specific actions (Mamiya is, strangely enough, the only character required to crawl with her buttocks pressed against the camera). Mamiya's is the most divergent style, using projectiles and crossbows to give a long-range edge in the claustrophobic brawls, and easing the difficulty curve considerably.

Not that conquering the legions of marauders is ever a real problem; as with *Dynasty Warriors*' uber-warlords, your arsenal and abilities far outweigh the sloppy, seemingly unscripted attacks of the AI, leaving you regular pauses to think about which skull-exploding punch to throw next. Hooks, jabs, kicks and charged bursts of room-clearing specials are delivered with a heft and personality that Omega Force hasn't achieved before, aided by beautifully chunky character models that sprint through the crumbling world at a glorious pace.

Repetitiveness is the accusation most often hurled at the *Dynasty Warriors* series, and although there's an undeniable flavour of that franchise here, the developer has thrown enough characters and ideas at the wall to keep thumbs occupied – at least in this opening chapter. Perfunctory vehicles such as bikes and horses are flawed, clunky thrills, but they're there to provide a minor distraction, not play an integral role; a new avenue for squishing puny humans and a way to get from fight A to B.

The marriage of the *Fist Of The North Star* brand and the genre this developer has defined is one that'll be a dream for fans with both of those required tastes. The cast and story fit perfectly with Omega Force's predilection for empowering the player to god-like status, excusing and justifying the silliness on show through the cipher of an IP that's all brawn, no brain, and all the bone-breaking better for it.

The final phase of boss battles is your execution, via timed inputs, of the villain. A *Street Fighter*-esque splash screen frames your punches and face-pulping kicks



Mamiya's grab ends in a kick right where it hurts, leaving her with ample time to step back and admire her handiwork before moving on to the next hapless goon

FORMAT: **MAC, PC**
PUBLISHER: **PUPPY GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Revenge Of The Titans

Puppy Games hopes to prove that an early (sales) offence makes the best (tower) defence



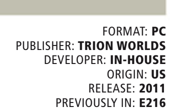


Although the enemies do use roads to travel faster, their movements aren't always restricted to specific routes, as in *PixelJunk Monsters*. Weapons need to be reloaded and currency collected manually. We worry that strategy could be obscured by frantic clicking

Time was, selling a game before actually finishing its development counted as a mortal sin – and though the likes of *Boiling Point* are still bound for a special hell, certain indie devs have found a route to absolution via an increasingly popular 'sell first, get out of beta later' model. Puppy Games follows in the footsteps of Mode7, Quel Solaar and TaleWorlds, selling access to a beta version of its tower defence game at a reduced rate, and then working towards a more fulsome final release with feedback from paying testers. In the case of *Revenge Of The Titans*, the beta bundles a fair amount of content, and it's a polished, stable production that will only see more features poured into it in the coming months.

It has a slick vector-art style, making retro nods in its simplicity, but side-stepping the temptation of pixel art with vector bevels and gradient shading. It's chunky, cute and distinctive, although the art's concise nature struggles to clearly depict the huge diversity of buildings, weapons and enemies which clutter the battlefields of Earth, Mars and beyond. It's also not entirely clear which enemies – the tottering, towering alien Titans of the title – are susceptible to which weapons. With balancing still in flux, reacting to specific threats with specific tactics rarely proves to be cost-effective, and so strategy comes down to funnelling enemies into bottlenecks lined with as many cheap weapons as you can muster.

Nonetheless, even in such an over-subscribed genre, there are ideas here that are to be admired. The mixture of RTS-lite elements, like the need to harvest a limited supply of crystals for cash, the persistence of funds between levels and the welcome complications of the tech tree, force individual battle strategies into friction with overarching pressures. Already, a new release of the beta promises to introduce the ability to sell obsolete buildings, changing the economic flow of each bout substantially. With the ongoing development, UI niggles will be straightened out, and the action of the game transformed – but into what? Throw a few coins at the beta and you could help decide.



Rift: Planes Of Telara

Where's the niche for another fantasy MMOG? Trion Worlds is trying to find it

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **TRION WORLDS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2011**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E216**

An elven warrior stretches an arrow taut against the string. An improbably beautiful, long-haired man in intricate golden armour wields a sword. A dwarf stands by his side with an axe. A great evil threatens the peaceful equilibrium of the land. A weary player has seen it all before. What makes *Rift: Plains Of Telara* different? In a market flooded with fantasy MMOGs, differentiation is key. You've got to have your shtick.

The world of Telara may be familiar, but it is beautiful. The murky forests of Gloamwood and the glittering Sanctum with its marbled halls are straightforward but evocative old-fashioned fantasy. The effect when rifts – Oblivion Gates in all but name – open up and fire and lightning spread out across the sky like an apocalyptic sunset is undeniable. Rat-tailed, horned hell-beasts turn the ground beneath their feet to cracked magma. There's attention to detail in the characters, too, in their elegant look, smooth movement and idle animations.

Rift is betting most of its chips on a flexible skill system that allows you to switch between a bard and a deadly nightblade assassin at the touch of a button, letting you invest in non-combat skills without worrying about how you're going to make it through the next raid. Trion Worlds is presumably hoping that this malleability will be enough to tempt players away from the stricter competitors out there.

Heading into an open beta very soon, *Rift* doesn't so much take aesthetic inspiration from the *EverQuest* lineage as imitate it, but streamlined resurrection, skill trees and combat give it a technical edge. It has the confidence to take on *WOW*; does it have the character?



The creatures that spew forth from the rifts – fiery cracks between dimensions – range from rat-tailed obese monstrosities to evil-looking ram-horned fauns. Doesn't that crack in the sky look more than a little like the Eye of Sauron, though?





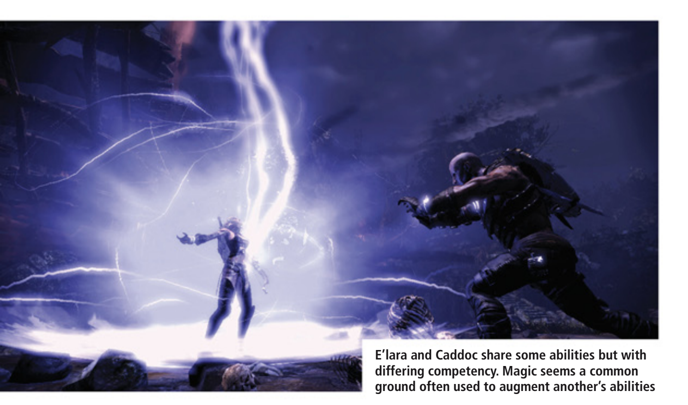
Character customisation is limited – choose from five or six preset faces and tweak them. Trion is keen to keep everyone in the world beautiful, which worked for *Guild Wars*, but we enjoyed creating freaks in *Saints Row*

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **BETHESDA**
DEVELOPER: **INXILE**
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q1 2011**

Hunted: The Demon's Forge

When Gears Of War met Tolkien: a tale of swords and sorcery, co-op and cover

It's a mark of just how generic the thirdperson cover shooter has become that one dressed in the equally generic trappings of a Tolkien-esque universe feels so fresh. But beneath the chainmail, *Hunted: The Demon's Forge* is very much in line with its sci-fi and modern-day brethren.


E'lara and Caddoc share some abilities but with differing competency. Magic seems a common ground often used to augment another's abilities

So much so, in fact, that the usual trappings associated with elves, dwarves and their ilk are unceremoniously pushed into the background. The dense plot and levelling are there, but unobtrusively tucked away so as not to interrupt the action. Developer InXile sees this as a way of drawing in shooter fans, but it's likely to leave fantasy lovers out in the cold. It's all the more surprising considering InXile's founder Brian Fargo previously worked on *Baldur's Gate* and *The Bard's Tale*.

That said, the game plays solidly enough. Fighting and (rather good) puzzling is divided between a mismatched duo of a busty elf and scarred warrior. Both have their strengths yet both share the ability to switch between ranged and melee attacks on the fly.

Button mashers will find the combat satisfyingly brisk, but it's more thoughtful gamers who will really reap the rewards. Ice powers may be hackneyed, but freezing Ray Harryhausen-inspired skeletons and watching your teammate smash them to pieces is a good example of the game's approach to co-op. But for all InXile's highfalutin' talk

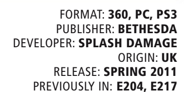





The banter between the two leads adds likeability to an otherwise predictable concoction of clipped accents and exposed cleavage. The plot sees our heroes setting out in search of kidnapped villagers, with a fortune in gold on the table should they complete their missions

(it's described as 'interdependent co-op'), there seems little new on offer here either.

Fargo and his team are demonstrating a convincing grasp of thirdperson action, but is that enough? There's not much evidence yet that there's anything fresh here beyond the swords'n'sorcery setting, and InXile will need to do more than swap one generic palette for another.



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **BETHESDA**
DEVELOPER: **SPLASH DAMAGE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SPRING 2011**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E204, E217**

Brink

An emphasis on individual needs still disappoints in multiplayer

The firstperson shooter has evolved to a point at which enthusiasts occupy one of two camps. On one side are the casual fans who rarely leave the comfort of the singleplayer game, on the other the hardcore sharpen their knives and practise headshots in increasingly elite multiplayer games. Marrying the two experiences has, so far, proved problematic, with many developers now employing separate teams to handle the different components. Splash Damage is taking a different tack.

Brink has much to recommend it – a well-developed plot, a dynamic movement system and slick character creation tools to name but three – but the game's E3 demo raised questions. It's the AI squad commander above all else that simultaneously impresses and divides. A group hug of an innovation, it generates missions on the fly enabling even weaker players to take an integral role in multiplayer missions. But there's integral and there's integral.

The Gamescom demo made a good case in point. As part of a small team, a squad of players were charged with stealing a powerful bio-weapon. It's a large-scale mission that makes a virtue of each class's unique abilities. Engineers, for instance, are required to operate a crane winch to transport an extraction robot across a chasm, whereas operatives are required to hack secure doors and place charges. In theory, this should engender a sense of teamwork. In practice the ability to switch classes on the fly means that more able players can pretty much do all the work. For those players, *Brink* may prove popular. For those less able, those who hoped it would revolutionise the way we play multiplayer games, it could lead to disappointment.

Of course, multiplayer's loss could prove the singleplayer campaign's gain. With a more focused experience that makes every player the leading man such dynamism may yet raise *Brink*'s game above that of its bigger-budget rivals. Any fanfare surrounding it will inevitably be drowned out by the imminent and explosive release of *Call Of Duty: Black Ops* and *Medal Of Honor*, but come its release in 2011 it could still prove more influential than either.

The playable mission on show at Gamescom had a squad of variously skilled classes escort a field robot capable of retrieving a biological weapon




Brink dares to borrow *Team Fortress 2*'s class model almost wholesale. It's a smart move that allows for distinctive play styles from person to person





THE GAME'S BOND

Blood Stone isn't a tie-in, it's a break-out. The newest chapter of Bond is interactive – and even more action-packed than before

TITLE: **BLOOD STONE 007**
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION BLIZZARD**
DEVELOPER: **BIZARRE CREATIONS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**

James Bond will return. Until recently, that line was one of cinema's surest promises. With 22 Bond films released since 1962, six actors having taken on the role and a gritty 2006 reboot securing the franchise's place in the 21st century, the secret agent's trajectory through the history of action cinema has always seemed as assured and unstoppable as a high-calibre bullet. And then, earlier this year, that bullet ricocheted off a wall of financial difficulties. Production of what was to be Sam Mendes' Bond 23 is currently shelved (or, according to certain sources, cancelled) as a result of movie studio MGM's ongoing financial difficulties.

They'll be sorted out eventually, of course, and James Bond *will* return to the big screen. But the question is: will anyone feel his absence at all? Fans of the series left anxiously awaiting Daniel Craig's third outing can find solace in the knowledge that there's not one, but two Bond games due out before the end of year. Bizarre Creations' *Blood Stone* is a thirdperson action game hoping to blend the gunplay, car chases and brutal hand-to-hand fight scenes which define Daniel Craig's Bond into a single, fluid experience. Fellow British dev Eurocom, meanwhile, is crafting

a new take on *GoldenEye*, the greatest Bond game made to date.

But what's the enduring appeal of Ian Fleming's Cold War creation? The world into which he was born is long gone, but even before he was officially rebooted as a leaner, blonder model, he was an oddly ageless hero. One man who can tell us why is screenwriter **Bruce Feirstein**, who, as well as penning Pierce Brosnan's first three Bond movies (including GoldenEye), has written the script for both Bizarre's title and Eurocom's updated take on his own screenplay.

"James Bond is one of the archetypal figures of our times," he says, before correcting himself, and in doing so summing up the key to Bond's appeal: "Let me say that again: James Bond is one of the great archetypal figures throughout recent history." Feirstein attributes Bond's mutable nature as the key to the character's success. "Every man who plays Bond has reinvented him as a reflection of their time," he says. "I think Connery was a perfect Bond for the Cold War, and Roger Moore reflected a strange period of history when the balance of power was shifting." The later Bonds? "Pierce [was right for] the end of the Cold War," says Feirstein, "and Daniel Craig has created a brilliant Bond to play in this particular period where there are new threats." However attached you may be to a particular take on the character, Feirstein is adamant that Bond's capacity for reinvention is crucial to his long-term appeal: "Otherwise you're stuck – he becomes a character frozen in time."

Of course, Bond hasn't just transcended time periods, he's transcended any single medium. The films might have long ago surpassed their source material as the central pillar of the Bond franchise, but the symbiotic relationship remains – it was Fleming's 1953 book Casino Royale to which movie production company EON returned for inspiration in 2006, after all. And while games aren't – yet – as totally entwined with the franchise at large, the most intimate relationship between two Bond products is without doubt that between *GoldenEye 007* and its celluloid source: long before the phrase 'crossmedia entertainment' was excitedly scrawled over whiteboards in advertising firm boardrooms the world over, Rare's FPS left a generation of gamers unable to watch that film without imagining the networks of rooms and corridors spiralling out from its sets.

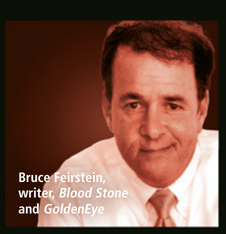
THE SPY WHO LED ME

We aren't shown multiplayer during our visit, but Bizarre is open about what it entails. "It's a team-based, objective-based multiplayer game which pits MI6 against mercenaries," says Cavanagh. The game's takedown and focus kill mechanics will be fully replicated in multiplayer, though the takedowns will be simplified for syncing reasons. "The best player in the MI6 team becomes James Bond and the best player on the opposing team becomes his enemy," continues Cavanagh. "Originally we didn't intend to put Bond in multiplayer at all, and just to treat it as a separate game, but partway through we realised we had to put Bond in it." Players not skilled enough to become 007 can take comfort from his presence, though: "If you're new to the game, you can see who the most efficient player is, because he's Bond, and you can just follow him around."

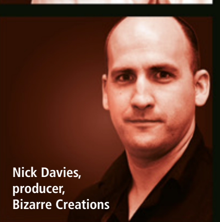


Blood Stone's authenticity extends to Bond's wardrobe, with outfits designed by Lindsay Pugh, costume designer on Quantum Of Solace

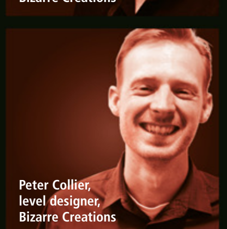
"What does Daniel Craig's Bond mean? It means hand-to-hand, it means a certain element of gunplay and that he's going to be very physical"



Bruce Feirstein, writer, *Blood Stone* and *GoldenEye*



Nick Davies, producer, Bizarre Creations



Peter Collier, level designer, Bizarre Creations

So, a character rivalled only by the Doctor in his capacity to invent himself anew, and a stalled franchise with a proven track record in jumping from medium to medium, and which also proved capable of inspiring some of gaming's finest moments. The game industry and Hollywood have, for the most part, found a mutually beneficial equilibrium, at the heart of which lies the licensed product, but is this the first chance games have had to take over a piece of highly prized cinematic turf?

Bizarre Creations seems to hope so. **Matt Cavanagh**, *Blood Stone*'s lead designer, says: "We've got a window of opportunity here. As a videogame developer we've got a chance to shine – for a Bond fan, we're filling that void. If we can do that successfully, then it would be a great thing for us." Activision's producer on the game, **James Steer**, adds: "If *Blood Stone* comes out and is accepted as the next chapter in Bond, where does that lead us? When *Blood Stone* comes out, if you want your hit of Bond, you've got to get it from *Blood Stone*. There's no film."

But even if *Blood Stone*, a standalone story starring Daniel Craig's Bond, is perfectly placed to take advantage of the lull between movies, there's still the not inconsiderable challenge of designing a game around one of cinema's more versatile heroes. Movie Bond is a jack of all trades: spying, shooting, driving and punching his way from scene to scene. Games tend to specialise – even *GoldenEye*'s tank-based foray through the streets of St Petersburg is best forgotten. Bizarre, however, is undeterred. "We started breaking it down, asking: what does Daniel Craig's Bond mean?" says Steer. "It means the hand-to-hand side of things, it means a certain element of gunplay and that he's going to be very physical." "We discussed not doing driving," Cavanagh explains, "but I think we decided that the Aston Martin was such a big part of the franchise that it was worth doing. When Quantum Of Solace came out and it had that car chase in the opening scenes, I think that vindicated the idea of having driving as well."

At its core, *Blood Stone* is a thirdperson shooter, albeit one that breaks up its shooting with a powerfully efficient hand-to-hand takedown mechanic. The first level Bizarre shows us takes place in Istanbul. A cutscene sets up Bond's mission – to find a missing researcher whose location has been tracked to a construction site in the area.



While the facial animation is competent, animating the features of a man who doesn't animate his own far beyond piercing stares was never going to be easy

What begins is a simple investigation scene, as Bond walks down a street lined with civilians before talking his way into the site. At this point, he breaks out the only gadget which the gritty, raw, Daniel Craig interpretation of the character will allow: a smartphone – one that highlights points of interest on the site, to be precise. Scanning these spots and generating evidence is as simple as pressing a button, though each piece discovered fleshes out backstory detail which can be accessed through a menu screen. It isn't long before Bond's prying arouses the suspicion of the workers, who take the rather incriminating step of locking him in a portable cabin and attempting to drop him, via crane, into a pit. One daring escape later, however, and the mechanics that make up the bulk of *Blood Stone*'s on-foot gameplay emerge.

Bond's smartphone can now be used to pick out the gun-toting workers prowling around the site – which, it turns out, is packed with enough girders and chest-high piles of building material to make it perfect for cover-based gameplay. Checking the phone lowers Bond's weapon, but tags nearby enemies – even those hidden by walls – with a red symbol. The result is a less super-powered version of *Arkham Asylum*'s detective mode – a grainy filter of static, which distorts more heavily as Bond moves, overlays the action when the phone's in use, and ensures players can't stay in the mode for too long. Nonetheless, its presence allows avenues of attack to be identified and exploited.

Skulking behind cover, Bond waits for a worker to move closer and, with a tap of X, leaps out of hiding before subduing him with a flurry of hand-to-hand moves – clearly reminiscent of fight scenes from the last two films, right down to the close-up, wobbly cam presentation. "We've worked with [Daniel Craig's stunt double] Ben Cooke", says **Nick Davies**, *Blood Stone*'s producer at Bizarre. "He shows us exactly what Bond would do – it's great." Once the enemy's disabled, Bond fluidly slips back behind the cover he just leapt from, avoiding the trail of bullets spat from the rifle of one of the unconscious guard's comrades.

While standard stop-and-pop gunplay is an option, Bizarre shows us the different ways a scenario such as this can play out over the course of a couple of checkpoint restarts. Cautious players can, through a mixture of cover-based takedown manoeuvres and judicious use of the smartphone, stalk their way to the next objective – leaving nothing but a trail of snapped necks and crushed windpipes behind them. Bizarre's demonstration of this approach ends

Bond's escape from this gigantic drill punctuates one of the Istanbul level's quieter moments, and calls to mind some earlier films' more contrived moments

with Bond charging at the last man standing and sliding – feet first – over his cover and into his face with a move which segues smoothly from running into the takedown animation.

Second time through the construction site, Bizarre is keen to show off a key feature of the gunplay. Standard gunfire (on the difficulty Bizarre is using to demonstrate the game, at least) drops enemies fairly rapidly, but every successful takedown move carried out grants Bond a free 'focus kill': hit the focus button and rather than requiring the player to aim manually, Bond will rapidly snap to his next target before firing off a one-shot, one-kill round. Together, the takedowns and the focus kills allow the player to shift gears rapidly between melee and gunplay – the risk of exposure caused by breaking cover for a takedown mitigated by the focus kill reward.

If the above sounds a lot like Sam Fisher's mark-and-execute manoeuvre from *Splinter Cell: Conviction*, that's because it is – though it's fair to say that both Fisher's game and Bond's recent cinematic outings have been drawing inspiration for their brutal and efficient killing from those other JBs – Jason Bourne and Jack Bauer – of late. Unlike Fisher, Bond can't tag multiple enemies at leisure and drop them sequentially, but the empowering effect on the player – and the shift in focus to setting up takedowns rather than carrying them out – is the same, as is the suspension of disbelief required by the imposition of a videogame's structure on to what should be Bond's natural abilities. "We explored a lot of ideas," says Cavanagh, "but in the end we kept coming back to this very simple system." Level designer **Peter Collier** adds: "It just defines the ruleset for the player, and that allows them to strategise. They've got to think about which guards they're going to take down, in which order, and when to use focus."

Later, Bizarre shows us a level a little farther into the game, in which Bond sneaks into a casino in Monaco. The opening cutscene gives us a glimpse of *Blood Stone*'s Bond girl, Nicole Hunter, voiced by English singer-songwriter Joss Stone. Hunter doesn't stick around long (she heads into the casino to divert attention) but the brief glimpses we get suggest a character who'll fit perfectly into the recent films' trend for slightly haughty females. It's also in this section we're shown how *Blood Stone*'s combat mechanics will work when applied to a setting more conducive to the stealthy approach. As Bond (wearing the iconic dinner jacket) skulks past partygoers and heads into the heavily guarded gardens behind the casino, opportunities emerge for the occasional contextual takedown – pushing guards with their backs turned off ledges – and out of sight – for instance. In these sections, saving focus kill rewards (the game allows a maximum of three) allows group patrols to be quickly dispatched without raising the alarm. We aren't shown what happens after Bond eventually sneaks into the casino through an open window on the first floor, but we'd wager it leads to a car chase.

Back in Istanbul, Bond's battle through the construction site – which includes a segment in which he flees an absurdly sized piece of underground digging machinery – leads, as these things do, into a car chase through the streets of the city. And an awfully pretty one at that, too, the scenery flashing by in a mixture of saturated browns and blues which capture the palette of 2008's Quantum Of Solace. And, having watched that film in preparation for our visit, one of the most immediately appreciable aspects of Bizarre's chase scenes is the fact it's possible to tell what's going on. And an *awful* lot is going on. As Bond and his quarry hurtle through the streets, to the docks and out again before reverting to an on-foot chase through some ruins, there's nary a single piece of scenery that isn't destroyed. Sparks – and bullets – fly, café chairs and tables are upturned. Petrol stations explode. Even a John Woo-style flock of doves is scattered. Occasionally the game slows down to capture a single moment of action – a jeep packed full of bad guys flipping in mid-air, for instance – but most of the time demands that players remain constantly aware of their surroundings, and monitor the interplay between these scripted hazards and other

A VIEW TO A BILL

For those unaware of the problems that have halted production of Daniel Craig's third Bond movie, a quick recap: movie studio and Bond financier Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer has accrued a debt valued at $4 billion leaving it unable to fund new projects. Contractual issues prevent Bond production company EON (which has worked with Bizarre and Eurocom on their games) taking the movie elsewhere. When asked, Feirstein is keen to downplay the rumours and stress the movie will be made. "As soon as everything works out with MGM, Bond will be back," he says. He does acknowledge the fortuitous timing for the games, however: "I think the games are a very nice gift to Bond fans this particular fall. I think games are important to the future of the movie business. We're in a world where games are three times as big as the movie business, and I think that people expect in big action franchises to be able to re-experience [them] in a game format."

Pretty as the scenery is, you're unlikely to notice it at 110mph. "You blast through a driving level, burning our months of man-hours in ten minutes," Cavanagh says

"We wanted it to be a cinematic experience and a cinematic game, but we obviously don't want the player crashing and burning throughout"


Vehicles such as this tank raise the intensity of on-foot sections. The race through Istanbul involves avoiding fire from a helicopter which cannot be taken down

Ferstein: "There's a sequence Bizarre came up with, where you see a lighthouse topple. To pull that off in movies would have been nearly impossible"

risks on the road, such as traffic. "It's a unique experience every time," explains Cavanagh. "There are scripted elements, but in terms of the movement and behaviour of the vehicles, you get different experiences."

Bizarre shows us a later driving section, set in Siberia, in which Bond chases a train departing an oil refinery – which isn't so much exploding as erupting. We thought the previous chase scene was hectic, but in this level the sky is literally raining fire. As we hurtle past exploding tankers and over ice floes, it's almost too much to cope with, and the one occasion a black cloud of smoke from an upturned, burning lorry obscures our view of a car we subsequently slam into does annoy, but a couple of restarts are a more than fair price for such a spectacle. "It's a lot of work," says Cavanagh of balancing the difficulty of these sections, "because we wanted it to be a cinematic experience and a cinematic game, but we obviously don't want the player crashing and burning throughout the driving. It's about getting that balance exactly right so they're permanently on the edge of their seat but not dying all the time."

Bizarre is confident that the presence of these sections helps to replicate the momentum of the films. "It helps us to hit those peaks in terms of pacing," says Collier. "The films nail the pacing, so it's something we absolutely had to get right." It's hard not to notice these set-pieces outdo anything seen in the films in terms of scale – something which writer Feirstein attributes to the lack of constraints which games offer. "Games are a tremendous amount of fun," he says, "because you sit down and say, 'OK, we need an opening action sequence: let's put it in Athens. Let's use the acropolis'. And everyone says, 'Yeah, that's a cool idea, let's do it'. Whereas in a movie you'd say, 'Let's put the opening sequence in Athens' and the first thing you'll hear is: 'I don't know if we can afford that and if we can get clearance. Let me check it out and see what tax breaks we can get from the Greek government'. In movies the question is: can we execute this? With games it's: that's a great idea – how can we top this?"

We ask Feirstein if it's a challenge to a stretch a Bond plotline over a multiple-hour game, and his response is ebullient. "It's tremendously freeing! You get to do things which wouldn't appear in the movies. In the *GoldenEye* game you meet a former United States general who now runs security in Dubai. He shows you around a little a bit, and he's a somewhat wry, humorous character. In a movie he would have had, like, four lines, but we spend a little time with him." Feirstein also dismisses the idea that writing a game requires a plotline to be stretched too thinly: "In terms of script, the game isn't really longer. The difference between a two-hour movie and a 12-hour game is the missions and impediments."

For Bizarre, of course, the difference between the movies and the game is that the latter is its chance to direct a chapter in Bond's history – one destined for more scrutiny as fans look to *Blood Stone* to slake the thirst caused by the absence of Bond 23. The pressure is on, but Cavanagh has his own take on why: "I think we put the pressure on ourselves to make a great game. There not being a movie can't put any more pressure on us in that respect." Even so, it's hard to imagine there isn't a movie producer somewhere – perhaps in a hollowed-out volcano – stroking a white Persian cat and watching *Blood Stone* with anxious eyes.



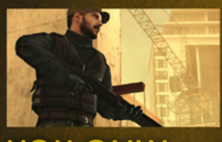
The level of carnage in the driving sections can rival that of Bizarre's previous title, *Blur*. A mutual love of flinging cars all over the road belies the shared heritage



GOLDENEYE 007

Out with the old mechanics, story, maps and leading man, and in with the new

FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION BLIZZARD**
DEVELOPER: **EUROCOM**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**



YOU ONLY DIE TWICE

Having made his feelings on the franchise's capacity to reinvent itself clear, Feirstein explains the steps which have been taken to bring *GoldenEye* up to date. It turns out computer nerd Boris wasn't invincible, after all: "We dropped him from this, because the idea of only one person being able to run computers or computers being something mysterious really doesn't work." Also updated is villain Trevelyan's motivation, which originally dated back to World War II. Finally, the biography of ex-KGB agent Zukovsky has been completely rewritten. Played by Robbie Coltrane in the films, the character has been restyled as a nightclub-owning oligarch in the vein of Roman Abramovich.

There has always been a spiritual link between *GoldenEye* and *Perfect Dark*, so let's begin with the latter's HD remake released earlier this year. Despite our initial excitement, and respect for the care that went into its production, the Xbox 360 edition ended up barely touched. *Perfect Dark* is still a great game in itself, just not quite as great in the context of today's FPS world. A version of *GoldenEye* in HD already exists, of course, consigned forever to the Rare vaults by legal brouhaha and Nintendo's grumblings: that game will never see release. But Eurocom's *GoldenEye 007*, a game you can't really call a remake, will be out on Wii in November. Talk about plot twists.

Remakes are always rose-tinted. Eurocom's *GoldenEye* is a very different beast from Rare's *GoldenEye*, tiptoeing between homage and the reality of today's shooter scene where *COD* reigns supreme. It's a slick production: all the cinematics play out in firstperson (somewhat mitigating the weird decision to replace Brosnan with Craig), there's all of the voice talent you'd expect, and plenty of graphical flourish in its *COD*-inspired briefings. The modern FPS genre is always going to struggle a little on Nintendo's hardware, and only a fool would call *GoldenEye* ugly, but its textures are environmental detail still contrast sharply with the best on PS3/360.

It will surprise no one that the basic shooting and combat are lifted straight from Activision's *COD* franchise by way of Treyarch's *Quantum Of Solace* – but it adds something interesting from the source. We see a level set in the jungle, which doesn't bear any relation to its Natalya-escorting inspiration, and play a good bit of multiplayer.

Jungle first, and what Eurocom retains. You can still sneak around, silently headshotting guards with the silenced PP7, or just waltz through with an AK-47 and damn the inconvenience. The simplicity of the choice belies the situations it creates, where your approach can turn a fairly standard patrol into long minutes of creeping and silent gunshots, or into a deleted scene from Rambo as enemies run for you in heaving packs.

Setting off the alert results in enemies pouring in, dropped off via helicopter. Here, the *COD* comparison rears its head again, Bond perishing rapidly under any kind of sustained fire. The alternative is sneaking, with a little spice added by hackable auto-turrets – though whether they provide durable fun or prove something of a hassle we'll have to wait and see. The mooted destructible scenery is absent from this demo, though present and correct are stealth 'takedowns' (the sleeper hold an unexciting replacement for the original's karate chop, we reckon).

Multiplayer is extensively customisable online with up to eight players. For us it's the old splitscreen classic with four players as various Bond villains – and our first big surprise. The maps are all new. The action that unfolds across them isn't quite as unpredictable, but it messes with certain preconceptions all the same.

It's not subtle stuff: we're Oddjob, on a roll of double kills thanks to a throwable razor-rimmed hat, circle-strafing with Baron Samedi next to a packing crate. *GoldenEye* plays like *COD* online – but certain characters wield the gadgets made famous by their cinematic appearances, and up close it can all feel a little bit Benny Hill for short periods. Then a spoilsport pulls out the Uzi. The visuals obviously scale with four players, but this is fast and smooth deathmatch action that certainly feels among the best on Wii.

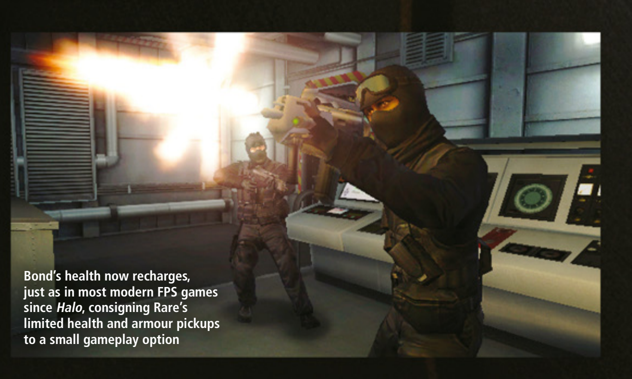
Replicating the impact of N64 *GoldenEye* is mission impossible, one beyond even Daniel Craig. This game keeps the name and remains faithful to the original's outlines and ideas, but beyond that it's unashamedly influenced by contemporary examples of the genre. Wii *GoldenEye* may well come in for a lot of stick because of that, but perhaps those critics should keep *Perfect Dark HD* in mind, and think about the last time they loaded it up.





One thing's for sure: the tank level will be an improvement on the original's. You can make out one of the new sentry guns below, as well as what seems to be a *Black Ops* refugee





Bond's health now recharges, just as in most modern FPS games since *Halo*, consigning Rare's limited health and armour pickups to a small gameplay option



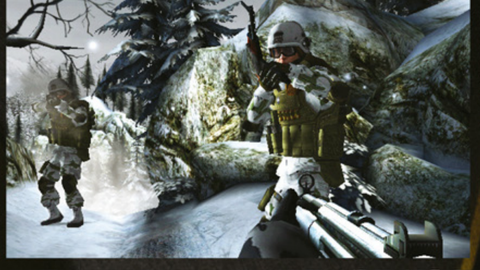
Q&A
Julian Widdows, executive producer, Activision Blizzard



Are you particularly intimidated by the legacy of the *GoldenEye* brand?
Yes, actually. It's an enormous responsibility. You're touching something that's so precious to so many people; every decision is weighed against that. How will the fans of *GoldenEye* respond to it? How will the casual gamer respond to it? How will the Bond fan respond to it? Every decision is influenced and shaped by those forces that are pushing around the project – so, yeah, enormously scary, but also really, really exciting. How many chances do you get to work on *GoldenEye*? It's a once-in-a-career opportunity.

How did you choose where to set the level of faithfulness for the remake?
We went back to the original game and asked ourselves what made that property so special. We distilled it down to three things. Firstly, it was that sense of being a secret agent, of being James Bond, which was riddled throughout the game. Then I think it was player choice: it gave players a sense of freedom and of having choice that I think was really rare in the shooter space at the time. And the multiplayer was an enormous part of it – all of us kept coming back to it for the multiplayer. I remember I lost hours and months as a poor student playing *GoldenEye* round a mate's house. It was just part of the fabric of our lives: we played after work, we played after going out – it was just something we did.

Then it was a case of saying, "OK, what can't come forwards? What doesn't stand the test of time?" The narrative doesn't really stand the test of time in its purest form; it does feel very '90s. Daniel Craig's Bond is now more relevant and contemporary, so we had to bring that up to date.





While the crunchy Bourne-lite of the melee interactions is always tempting, beware: Bond can be taken down quickly. As for control, options exist for all sorts of input configurations



"I don't ever want to tarnish my memory of GoldenEye; I have such amazingly fond memories of it. It's still a great game"

How has adjusting for Daniel Craig's contemporary Bond affected the game?
Craig's Bond is more visceral, he gets up close and personal with people, and we really felt that had to form part of the game. So that's one of the newer pillars that you wouldn't have seen in the original Brosnan experience. There are small interactive, cinematic events which are about Daniel Craig's physicality. I think the other thing, as well, is that set pieces you might remember – some gadgets like lasers on watches – just don't suit Craig's universe: it's not what he's about, so trying to bring those things in is pretty impossible. What we've got instead is a unified device, this smartphone which he can use to hack computers and capture intelligence information.

How do you think *GoldenEye 007* plays nowadays?
I think it's like any game if you go back 13 years – all games are of their time. Let's put it this way: I wouldn't go back to play it again. I don't tend to go back to games that are 13 years old. It's an evolutionary medium and we keep building on the successes of previous games. It's still a great game and I think structurally it still has things that contemporary games tend not to have. I don't ever want to tarnish my memory of *GoldenEye*; I have such amazingly fond memories of it.

How close to the original is the new game in terms of design?
Level design couldn't be any more different. Level designs have to be built around the core mechanics – the way you move, the way you use your gun and the Wii Remote; all those things actually have quite a profound influence on how levels are designed and how the gameplay feels. I don't think you could do [a full remake] – people have different expectations now. This is no slight on the original, because it would still be in my top five games of all time, but we now have very different expectations. There's a few secrets for people who look hard enough – levels have nostalgic touchpoints. People who've played the original will go, "Ah, I recognise that."

People have fond memories of *GoldenEye*'s multiplayer maps – will they be appearing?
No. The truth is, you're damned if you do and damned if you don't. I think the reality is that people say they want the original maps, but I really don't think they do. If you put those maps in the game, they would be bitterly disappointed; it wouldn't give the same experience, for the reasons we spoke about. The core experience is contemporary; the way the game controls and feels, the way the guns feel, the way the shooting feels, the way you move through space – none of that is designed for those maps. That interplay between mechanics and spatial design is crucial, particularly in shooters and action games. They just wouldn't work, they really wouldn't.

What do you think was special about *GoldenEye*'s multiplayer? Was it simply the novelty?
That's definitely true – part of it was absolutely the novelty, it had to be, but I think what was special about it was that it was quite a pure and uncluttered experience. I think another thing was that it really encouraged social interactions. As we've gone online, fewer and fewer games offer that experience of people sitting on the sofa and engaging in an agreement as to how they're going to experience the game. There's also a real sense of fun. I think that as shooters have developed, they're got a lot more serious and a lot darker, and I think sometimes that sense of fun can be lacking. They're enjoyable, but there's that lightness of touch that *GoldenEye* had, and that was difficult to capture in the splitscreen.

“In our perfect world, everyone wears





WAR MACHINE

THE LATEST CALL OF DUTY COULD WELL BE THE MOST INTRIGUING ADDITION TO THE SERIES SINCE THE ORIGINAL MODERN WARFARE. BUT HOW DID TREYARCH SHIFT FROM DEPENDABLE SUBSTITUTE TO FRANCHISE LEADER?

At Los Angeles's Exposition Park, in a hangar-like chamber packed with demo pods, Treyarch studio chief **Mark Lamia** is greeting the world's press. This is the *Black Ops* multiplayer reveal event, the latest expensive, well-organised hype-fest in Activision's multimillion-dollar marketing campaign. "We've never been more fired up than we have been this year about *Call Of Duty: Black Ops*," he states. "We've done the best work we've ever done." It is the standard pre-release schtick and we've all heard it before. But Lamia is unguardedly earnest. He means it. And he has to.

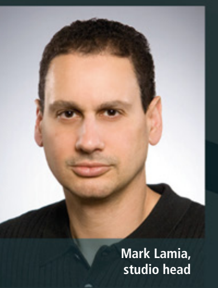
The expectations for *Black Ops* are immense. Not only is this the first *Call Of Duty* title since the record-breaking *Modern Warfare 2*, it's also the first since the high-profile disintegration of Infinity Ward following the sackings of studio heads Jason West and Vince Zampella. *Black Ops* is the defining title in a new era, an era in which the kings of COD are dead, and Activision will seek to split its mega-franchise across multiple genres and studios. Treyarch, always the dependable holding midfielder of the COD development regime, is now moving into a forward position. It's something the team is taking immensely

TITLE: **CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS**
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3, WII**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **TREYARCH**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**



As usual, the *COD* experience is all about frenzied group attacks on enemy sites, introduced via cinematic narrative sequences

An assault on a Russian weapons facility is likely to bring players face to face with the Spetsnaz soldiers, skilled in evasion and melee attack. They're not likely to cower behind cover


Mark Lamia, studio head

seriously. *Black Ops* is certainly Treyarch's best looking game. Using an updated version of the in-house *World At War* engine, running at 60fps with texture streaming and a host of cutting-edge dynamic lighting techniques, it's a dizzying cavalcade of explosions, environmental destruction and spraying blood. But more importantly, it is clearly also the developer's most ambitious project in terms of telling a story and exploring structure. In the wake of *World At War*, the decision was made pretty quickly to move beyond the safe confines of WWII, and to shake up the established conventions of the whole series. The Cold War era, comparatively unexplored by game-makers, seemed the perfect spot to settle.

"When we approached the period, we didn't want to limit ourselves to one conflict," says Lamia. "We did a lot of research on Vietnam – it's such a significant conflict in that era. We looked at the Bay of Pigs, at CIA operations… there was clearly a lot of activity in Africa and South America. We could have ended up going almost anywhere in the world. But what we homed in on were black operations. And when we did that, it meant we could use historical conflicts as a backdrop – so while the game weaves its way through South East Asia, and you're there when the Tet offensive is kicking off, it's not about the Vietnam war."

"I'VE BEEN INCREDIBLY VAGUE ON THE STORY BECAUSE I THINK IT'S GOING TO BE THE THING THAT SURPRISES PEOPLE THE MOST"

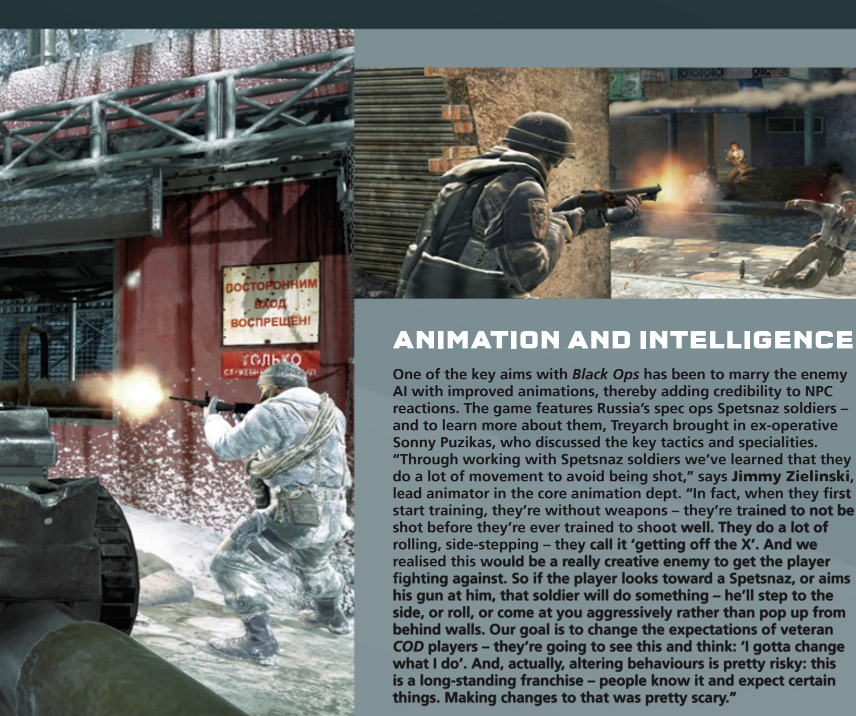
The team began researching pre-Delta Force units, small teams of specialist operatives employed throughout the '50s and '60s in deniable operations, usually with an anti-communist agenda. They hit on the Studies and Observations Group, formed in 1964, which dealt in unconventional and psychological warfare tactics during the Vietnam conflict. A former SOG soldier, John Plaster, was brought in to provide background detail. Plaster has written a book about his experiences, and these began to form the basis of the *Black Ops* narrative. The designers also consulted Hank Keirsey, the retired Lieutenant Colonel who has advised *COD* teams since the very first title. He related his experiences of commanding a mechanised company in Germany in the early '80s, training soldiers to react in the event of a Soviet invasion.

"So we had a timeline of everything that was going on in the world through that time, and we had an idea of the type of game we wanted to make," explains Lamia. "We wanted to emphasise the variety of locales… We wanted people to feel there was a lot of variety in the environments, but also in the objectives, the pacing – there are a lot of different kinds of levels. And we weave this through the historical backdrop."

There is certainly variety. The three singleplayer levels Treyarch has revealed so far all take place in 1968, but over very different locales. The mission named Victor Charlie is a bloody slog through the jungles of Vietnam, with playable character Sergeant Mason surviving a helicopter crash before swimming along the Huong River, attacking a Viet Cong village and finally escaping through the hellish tunnel system. Payback allows the player to control a helicopter (a first for the series) as it takes off from a prison camp in Laos, strafing terrified enemy soldiers and indulging in fraught air-to-air combat with other choppers. Then there's WMD, featuring a raid on a weapons manufacturing facility perched on the frozen heights of the Ural mountains.

This is all fine for gameplay diversity, but the worry is we'll get a repeat of the *Modern Warfare 2* storyline – an incoherent globetrotting mish-mash of vaguely associated set-pieces. Lamia recognises the concern, but is adamant that Teyarch has reined all of these components into a cogent narrative experience. At its centre is the very idea of secrecy, of ambiguity. "The cool thing is, well, do you really know why the Bay of Pigs happened?" he asks. "Maybe that was just a cover for something. Maybe it wasn't. You wouldn't know. Back then the communications were different, the way things were reported was different – so if you have that mindset, you can get an idea of the creative approach on this game."

Lamia won't say, but it seems *Black Ops* will not be using a conventional war game narrative. Early teasers featured a sequence



Weapons are based on real life. The team gets on the firing range with as many as possible, noting loading times and recording audio

ANIMATION AND INTELLIGENCE

One of the key aims with *Black Ops* has been to marry the enemy AI with improved animations, thereby adding credibility to NPC reactions. The game features Russia's spec ops Spetsnaz soldiers – and to learn more about them, Treyarch brought in ex-operative Sonny Puzikas, who discussed the key tactics and specialities. "Through working with Spetsnaz soldiers we've learned that they do a lot of movement to avoid being shot," says Jimmy Zielinski, lead animator in the core animation dept. "In fact, when they first start training, they're without weapons – they're trained to not be shot before they're ever trained to shoot well. They do a lot of rolling, side-stepping – they call it 'getting off the X'. And we realised this would be a really creative enemy to get the player fighting against. So if the player looks toward a Spetsnaz, or aims his gun at him, that soldier will do something – he'll step to the side, or roll, or come at you aggressively rather than pop up from behind walls. Our goal is to change the expectations of veteran *COD* players – they're going to see this and think: 'I gotta change what I do'. And, actually, altering behaviours is pretty risky: this is a long-standing franchise – people know it and expect certain things. Making changes to that was pretty scary."

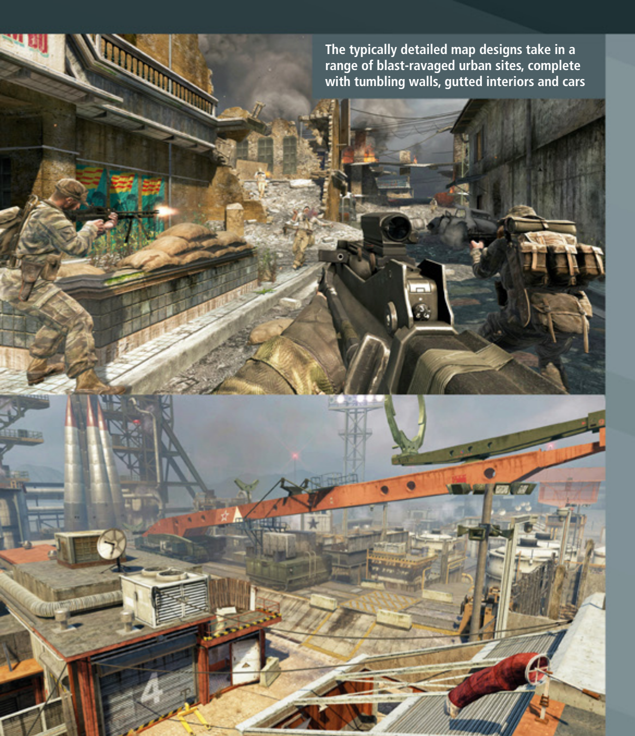
in which a soldier is apparently tied down and injected with some sort of performance-enhancing narcotic. When asked whether Jacob's Ladder, Adrian Lyne's movie about a group of US soldiers experimented on with psychoactive drugs, was an influence, Lamia merely smiles and replies: "There were a lot of influences. I've been incredibly vague on the story because I think it's going to be the thing that surprises people the most. It's unlike any other *COD* game, it's entirely original."

"Here's what I can tell you," he continues after not much badgering. "The story is being told from the moment you put in your disc, to the end of the campaign. You do play some different characters along the way, but it is literally… it's going to challenge you to figure out what's going on. It's so immersive, the story is so tied to everything you're doing – you won't be saying: 'I don't see how the story and the gameplay are connected', but you may be saying: 'How do all the pieces fit together?' You'll need to make sense of it all – because this is black ops. We embraced everything that was going on in that era in a very big way."

Multiplayer is another area in which Treyarch is making its mark on *COD* convention. The developer has taken the XP upgrades system that's marked the last three titles and added a currency in the form of COD Points. Players earn these by playing in ranked multiplayer games and can then spend them on weapons and equipment that would not otherwise be available at their current rank. They can't simply save up and buy everything, though – some weapon classes still need to be unlocked through the XP ranking system, so you still need to be a good, experienced player to get hold of the most devastating weaponry.

To get the most out of the points system, the design team has added two new game features: Contracts and Wagers. In the former, players are able to take on specific time-limited tasks within multiplayer sessions: Mercenary contracts pay you for making a required number of kills; Operation contracts reward effective team-based gaming; and Specialist contracts provide offbeat projects to complete amid the fragging. The Wager mode is likely to be the star of the show, however, providing four dedicated multiplayer game types which allow players to bet on their performance – only those who finish in the top three will see any cash. Here, One In The Chamber is a deathmatch in which each player has just one bullet, and if that's wasted they're down to melee, while Gun Game is a new version of a cult *Counter-Strike* mode in which players work their way through a range of different weapons, upgrading each time they make a successful kill. It's frenzied, hugely competitive stuff, and the emphasis on mastering the full range of the *COD* arsenal will have hardcore fans salivating.

The addition of cash has already proven controversial, though, with some inevitably worrying that the in-game currency will soon be



The typically detailed map designs take in a range of blast-ravaged urban sites, complete with tumbling walls, gutted interiors and cars

FEAR AND TENSION

Black Ops makes groundbreaking use of full performance capture, the technique of simultaneously recording an actor's movement, facial expressions and dialogue, rather than handling each element separately. The action for the game's cinematic sequences was captured at The House Of Moves, the gigantic motion capture studio in LA used by major Hollywood movies as well as game developers. The project pushed the studio's setup to the limit, apparently overloading its electrical capacity: "We blew their transformer!" laughs Lamia. "The *Black Ops* set required them to buy more cameras than they'd ever had before. I asked them: 'Is all this going on our bill?'"

To accentuate the emotional elements of each performance, the animation team developed 'tension maps', a method of accurately capturing and replicating facial lines. "If an actor or character is moving around, it allows us to capture the crow's feet, and the wrinkles around the nose," Lamia explains. "So now, when our actors talk, and they get mad, you see the character lines, and it helps you to realise this guy's state, even if he's simply uneasy."

To build on this, the team has a camera trained on each actor throughout the motion session, put in place to capture their every movement. Lead animator **Adam Rosas** shows a clip of a capture session with the actor playing one of the lead characters, Woods. "When we bring that camera footage into Motion Builder and we have it right next to our animation, we're studying where his eyes are darting: 'Oh – he takes an uneasy look this way'," Rosas explains. "We want to capture that as much as possible. Right now the technology's not there to capture eye movements, so we use cameras as reference. We've meticulously gone through scenes and said, 'That bottom lid – can you just bring that up a little more? Because we're getting too much of that white underneath and it's making him look like a robot or a zombie or something'. We go in there frame by frame and try to match those as closely as possible. And we do all that by hand."





David Vonderhaar, multiplayer design director



Josh Olin, community manager

accompanied by the chance to use real money. Multiplayer design director **David Vonderhaar**, however, thinks COD Points are just a neat idea that will expose and exploit our base attitudes to money management: "When we said it's time to evolve the unlock system, and we came up with the idea of COD Points, we started to look at different types of people and what they do with money. Some invest it, so bam, there's the Contract mode, but some go to Vegas every weekend – hence the Wagers. COD Points provide a microcosm of the capitalist world in a game!"

Originally developed as an internal level-design tool, the Combat Training mode is another key newcomer, allowing players to set up custom competitions against AI-controlled foes. As Vonderhaar explains, "They have some smart behaviours, they'll try to steal care packages, they'll call in killstreak rewards, but they're practice dummies, and they're called dummies for a reason. It's a good way for you to get the vibe of multiplayer without people insulting your mom." Customisation has also been brought to the fore with an emblem editor allowing clans to add logos to weapons, and a theatre mode which records bouts and lets you edit them. It's a neat, intuitive and expansive system that should see some stylish shootout sequences hitting YouTube.

So far, four multiplayer maps have been shown off, and they all look and feel like very solid *Call Of Duty* standards. Launch is a dense, multi-level military base, complete with rocket launch pad; Radiation is a disintegrating Russian nuclear outpost; Cracked is an urban wasteland of detonated shops and crater-lined streets; and Summit is the sparse snow level, with another cluster of military-industrial buildings. It's classic stuff, filled with raised, semi-hidden viewpoints for sniping thrills, winding corridors and central spaces for all-out battles. There's a clever interplay of spaces like stairwells and passageways, allowing enemies to blast at each other as they rush from one set-piece locale to the next. It's consummate multiplayer design.

"This is a ground-based infantry shooter – you have to get the engagement distances right," says Vonderhaar. "We have rules. I have a Powerpoint presentation that's a hundred pages deep about what good engagement ranges are, and visual cues, and about continuous paths versus bends, and what colours things need to be to contrast. It's called the MP Level Design Bible and we take it very seriously. But rules are there to be broken and once you have a base map in place that follows those rules, you can start to do some weird things to it."

"THE PRACTICE DUMMIES ARE A GOOD WAY FOR YOU TO GET THE VIBE OF MULTIPLAYER WITHOUT PEOPLE INSULTING YOUR MOM"

One of those 'weird things' is the new interactive scenery. On several of the maps, there are buttons to press to open doors or cue timed events, like space rockets launching, that provide a focus beyond the shooting. "I don't think the community has fully grasped the importance of this," says **Josh Olin**, Treyarch's community manager. "Take Launch, for example, where the rocket takes off. If you're under it you die, but one of the Search and Destroy bomb sites is under there, and there's a Demolition site under there too. You have to time your attacks based around when that rocket's going to go off – and you can use that to win the game. In CTF, I've practised with my team here at Treyarch to capture the enemy flag, take it down through that route at just the right time, so the rocket launches and the guys who are chasing me can't get under there and have to turn round."

In Radiation, there's a set of blast doors that can only be opened and closed via a control panel on a platform nearby. This could well prove decisive in the Domination mode, as Olin points out: "If you've captured that point, it might be valuable to send a couple of guys up there to take the control panel and close the doors. Now the only point of attack is down through the tunnels – so you know where they're going to come from, they can't jump in from above. It can really change how the battle plays out."

And, naturally, there are new perks and killstreak rewards to discover. Some are re-skinned and slightly tweaked versions of familiar favourites: the UAV becomes a spy



The multiplayer level Launch features a rocket that can incinerate any soldiers underneath as it launches. It's one of several interactive features introduced to keep things interesting

The Summit multiplayer map takes place on a Russian mountain base, complete with rope bridges and a cable car

plane, the artillery strike becomes a mortar team, and the attack dogs are, well, the attack dogs (but much more deadly, apparently). There are complete newcomers, too. Most reports have pinpointed the amusing remote-control car, a reward for three consecutive kills that lets you speed a load of explosives toward any unwary enemy. It's tough to control, though, often getting hung up on scenery or whizzing straight past your target, but then if it was too easy to use it would quickly become an over-familiar nuisance.

That's part of the balancing, which – judging by the version playable at Treyarch's multiplayer reveal event in September – is expertly judged. "It all comes down to playtesting," explains Vonderhaar. "Every evening between three and five, we playtest the maps. Anybody on the team's invited, everyone rallies into the designer bullpen, then we do the pass-the-controller game – so whoever has the joypad is allowed to talk. We ask: 'What was one thing you liked? What was one thing you didn't like?' Then they pass the controller on. Sometimes this thing can take half an hour, sometimes it's an hour and a half, and finally I'm like: 'Get back to work!'"

There are several elements of the game yet to be announced. It's widely known that there will be fourplayer co-op, but Treyarch is keeping the details secret. And the Nazi Zombie mode, so popular in *World At War*, is certain to return. Indeed, the way the story behind that mode was later developed and explored in subsequent DLC may well hint at a crowd-sourced episodic future for *Black Ops*. As Lamia explains, "We continued to evolve [Nazi Zombies] after *World At War* – there was a dialogue going on with some of our hardcore community, and we were able to interact with the community and evolve – we did that with our zombie lore.

"And I expect that there will be some ways to do that with this game. We think it's cool to be able to provide additional creative content – we're looking at this game almost as though it's a platform entry into something that's ongoing. I'm not going to tell you that's our entire focus, but it's part of our genetic make up here that we're going to do stuff like that." So, is he talking about a continuing story exploring the Cold War into the '70s and '80s, via downloadable episodes? "There might be bits and pieces in *Black Ops*. I definitely think there's something very exciting about interacting in a live way, and being able to respond. With online connectivity, I just need a couple of back doors in order to introduce new things. And then the resources and time to work on them!"

There's certainly a sense at Treyarch that *Black Ops* will be the team's defining achievement. This is the one it gets to experiment with, whether that means a non-linear, narcotic-tinged narrative or a game that expands off into the future via crowd-sourced downloadable plot extensions. A rejuvenated Infinity Ward may well grab back all the attention if it announces *Modern Warfare 3*, but for now, *Call Of Duty* is all about this veteran studio from Santa Monica, which believes it has produced its best game ever.

Bobby Kotick

The CEO of Activision Blizzard, the world's largest thirdparty game publisher, on his career, Call Of Duty and controversy

Of course, it may be a setup, but it's too delicious not to report. Beside **Bobby Kotick**'s desk, in his modest office on the ground floor of Activision Blizzard's Santa Monica HQ, there's a fully kitted out DJ booth with CD decks and a mixer. "Oh, he's gotten into that since playing *DJ Hero*," says the head of corporate communications as we arrive. Has it been arranged for our benefit? Who knows? But, if so, top marks for effort.

An even more interesting prop sits on the coffee table behind which Kotick now seats himself. It's a pristine copy of Atlas Shrugged, Ayn Rand's objectivist opus about a rogue individualist capitalist who struggles against a dystopian regime. But Kotick, in person, is an engaging and affable presence. He knows the business inside out, his developers, his games and his commercial partners (the interview must conclude by midday because he's due to meet with Tony Hawk for lunch). But he *has* made enemies, and it feels like this is his moment to clear up a few misconceptions. He doesn't talk to the press much but today, despite his quiet demeanour, it feels a little like payback time.

Have you been into games since childhood?
I was in high school in the late '70s, so there weren't a lot of videogame systems. I got a 2600 in the early '80s, and when I was in college I got an Apple II. I played a lot of text adventures and then a lot of arcade games. I lived in Michigan, which is where I went to college, and we had *great* arcades there; I was a *Defender* addict for a while. The first text adventure I played was *Mystery House*. I stayed up all night to finish it, and I played all the Infocom text adventures like *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*.

So how did you get into the industry?
My first business was a software company. I started doing a Windows-like operating system for the Apple II – this was back in 1981. It was called Jane, and it was a mouse and word processor, spreadsheet, database and GUI… It got a lot of hype because it was before the Macintosh, and the Apple Lisa was just coming out at the time. My college room-mate worked at Apple Computer in France, and he saw a prototype for the Lisa and said, "Why would someone spend $10,000? We could do this for the Apple II." It was a great concept, but a terrible execution [laughs].

You did get a meeting with Steve Jobs, though, didn't you?
He called us and said, "Hey, bring it over, we want to see it." We gave him this demo, and when he saw the mouse he threw it on the floor and said, "This is the ugliest thing I ever saw – how could you even make this?" And he goes behind a table, takes out this little blue bag, unzips it and pulls out a prototype of the Macintosh. And we were like, "We're done…" [Laughs]. But he didn't have anybody at Apple who could do what they were doing on the Mac on the Apple II, and they had two new computers coming out – the IIGS and the IIc. So we ended up redoing [it] for those.

So suddenly you were a contract developer. Where did things go from there?
We got a contract with Commodore to do a word processor for the Amiga, and then we made an advanced version called Deluxe Write, which was the first productivity app Electronic Arts ever sold. So I was an EA developer!

It actually shaped a lot of my thinking on how you treat developers. I wasn't treated very well [laughs]. The contracts were crazy, but they were the only publisher that you could do anything with. Then we signed with id and the first thing we did was the *Heretic* and *Hexen* engine licence. That business grew and I was doing a lot of contract development for other people, but in 1987 I tried to buy Commodore.

It was a very weird period of time – there were no videogame systems after Atari collapsed. Nintendo introduced the Famicom in Japan, but there weren't any dedicated standalone videogame systems in the US. So Commodore had introduced the Amiga 1000 and it had the 500 on the drawing boards and was about to release it. It had this vision for the company that was more like Sun – it didn't want to be a consumer computer company. I had a very good friend who ran a hedge fund, and he and I went to try and convince the CEO of Commodore to let us take control of the company and turn it into a videogame company.

The idea was to take the disk drive and the keyboard out of the 500 and sell it as a 16bit videogame system. It was a *really* good idea, but I couldn't convince them.

> "I was an EA developer! That experience actually shaped a lot of my thinking on how you treat developers. I wasn't treated very well"

Commodore produced the Amiga CD32 in the end, but it was obviously too late.
Yeah, and that was our product. We went to them and said, "Here's what you need to do: first, you need to do a cartridge product, because you've got to get it done, and then



Bobby Kotick's role as CEO of Activision began in 1991, when the company was releasing console games such as *Die Hard* (NES) and its partner-to-be, Blizzard, was working on the likes of *RPM Racing* and various conversions of *Battle Chess*

the second iteration would be CD-based and you'll have a really compelling videogame system." But they just didn't want to do it.

So how has your dev experience shaped the way you work as Activision CEO?
The core principle of how we run the company is the *exact* opposite of EA. EA will buy a developer and then it will become 'EA Florida', 'EA Vancouver', 'EA New Jersey', whatever. We always looked and said, "You know what? What we like about a developer is that they have a culture, they have an independent vision and that's what makes them so successful." We don't have an Activision *anything* – it's Treyarch, Infinity Ward, Sledgehammer. That, to me, is one of the unassailable rules of building a publishing company. And in every case except for two, the original founders of the studios are still running the studios today. The only thing that we try to do is to provide a support structure to make them more successful. If you do a really good job – and a lot of our studios do – you get to pick what is, in my view, the most difficult thing to pick in the industry: to make original intellectual property.

EA is coming around to that approach with its 'city state' structure.
I've been an oppressed EA developer! The thing is, it doesn't work that way – you can't be a floor wax and then decide that you're going to become a dessert topping. That doesn't work, it's your DNA. [EA's] DNA isn't oriented towards that model – it doesn't know how to do it, as a culture or as a company, and it never has.

Game development is unpredictable, so giving studios autonomy is in some ways adding extra risk, though, isn't it?
I don't think so. I think if you pick your partners the right way… Virtually all of our studio heads are serious, responsible people. They want to make great games, they want to do it the right way, and I think one of the benefits we have [with] being a big company is that we don't have the same pressures of, "Oh, we have to have it out for this particular quarter."

There's not a studio at this company that will tell you: "Activision is forcing us to get the game out." We get in business with people who are responsible, they're creative, they want to make great games. The incentive schemes that we've devised all reward success. But there's not anything that is a "Hey, you have to get the game out on Thursday."

That was another thing I reacted very negatively to – EA saying, "You have to have it out, you have to have it out." It would also do the, "You have to add these features, you have to add these features, you have to add those features." We always used to say, "It takes one man and one woman nine months to make a baby. If you put nine guys on it, it's not going to happen any faster." [Laughs] And that would just fall on deaf ears! It'd be like, "Well, just get nine more guys…"

What informed the decision to greenlight *Blur* – was it an ambition to have more IP, or a commercial, or artistic, decision?
I can't say that I participate in the greenlighting of products, especially that one. My recollection is that we looked at big categories that we weren't in, and racing was one. I knew the Bizarre guys, I liked them a lot and I thought that *Project Gotham* was a really good game and [Bizzare was] the last independent developer that did 90-rated racing games… Bizarre was available and it was trying to decide whether it would do another Microsoft product or go multiplatform. So it was the [right] combination: a good category and we liked the studio. The idea that it originally pitched and started making is different to what *Blur* eventually became. The whole social component of the game happened mid-stream in development. That was a really good idea.

Do you have a vision for how much IP you want to introduce in, say, a year?
If we sat down and said, "We need eight IPs this year," there's no inspiration in that. In the last year, we've taken four or five *big* bets – *Singularity*, *Prototype*, *DJ Hero* and *Blur* were completely new. That's more than we usually would do, but in each case there was a very good reason why the developer chose to do it. Our process isn't that we say, "Neversoft, you make a new IP." When they wanted to make *Gun*, they certainly earned the right to make new IP. They came in and said, "This is our idea," and we provide a lot of the research that will tell them how to think about the product. Is there a market opportunity? Are there features you need to think about and incorporate?

Then they go off and make the game they want to make, and we try and be supportive. You have to earn the right to do that, so it's usually the really successful studios that get the right. But – oddly enough – historically, our most successful studios [have] always stayed specialised; they didn't want to make anything else. The really insightful developers realise that the pathway to innovation is greater from a proven property that has an audience… There are so few new IPs that are introduced successfully. Really great developers don't want to disappoint their audience, so they invest a lot of time and energy into building a game and the little things, such as how you play that game, what the UI is, what the storyline is, who the characters are. Great developers really own that franchise.

It's not like movies where the sequels are worse than the originals. If you're disciplined about it, virtually every time you can deliver a better next iteration. I think that everybody who's working on the *Call Of Duty* property wants to deliver a better game than they did last time. They have the resources, the drive, the ambition, the commitment, the inspiration and the benefit of – and we do a really good job of this, I think, way better than any of our competitors – talking to our players.





Kotick is keen to stress that Activision Blizzard, despite its scale and responsibility to shareholders, is open to taking risks, as demonstrated by the introduction of new IP such as *DJ Hero* (left), *Blur* (right), *Singularity* and *Prototype*, games which have had varied levels of chart success

You look at *WOW* – we have over 2,500 people in customer service. If you have an interaction with a customer service person in *WOW* and you give them an idea, there's a likelihood that if it's a good one, it gets implemented… What other company does that? Forget videogames, what other company *anywhere* does that? Recently we had this thing that happened with Real ID; players were very unhappy about it, and it took Blizzard 12 seconds to say, "We're not going to do this." Having that line of communication with your players is so incredibly valuable, because that's where great innovation comes from.

As a businessman, you'd perhaps be remiss not to monetise the multiplayer aspect of your games, especially as costs spiral. But does this place you in conflict with your community?
We get this unfair – probably from a vocal minority – misconception about our motivations. We don't think about monetisation; nobody sits down and says, "Oh, let's figure out how to do monetising!" We think about: how do you make a great game? And then we think about: how do you give people flexibility to pay what they think is fair? I find our customers are reasonable. We haven't raised the *WOW* subscription fee in seven years, but have development costs gone up? Unbelievably.

I don't think we look at things and say, "Oh, we have this much bigger investment in multiplayer, so now we have to charge for it." I think we look at it and say, "There's a certain expectation of value that you feel like you're getting for your $60, and we always want to exceed your expectation." I don't think consumers do the cost-per-hour-of-entertainment analysis directly, but if you're paying $60 and you get to pay *Modern Warfare 2* for a year, you feel pretty good about your $60. Then if there are new things that we give you like DLC, you don't have to buy it, but you have the option to buy it; if you think it's valuable, you pay for it…

Multiplayer is the same thing. If there are features and services that we give you for free, hopefully that gives you a comfort and a value that you like and some day in the future, like what we do with *WOW*; there may be more things that are valuable to you that you can choose to pay for. I wish it was more organised thought than that, but it isn't. Our business model is always, "How do you make a great game?" [Laughs]

You're saying all the things that gamers want to hear, but you've often found yourself as the target for internet vitriol. Have you ever taken it personally?
I get a lot of great press, and I get a lot of not-so-great press, but when you start believing the press you get, you're not going to be as effective as the head of a company. I don't take a lot of time to meet with journalists, so I think that what happened over the last couple of years is that two or three things that I've said got taken really out of context.

Like when you talked about taking the fun out of videogame development?
That was a joke! The fact that there are people – and it's a small vocal minority – that actually think that I meant it… How do you combat that? [Laughs]

So you've taken the sensible route and just not got drawn in – even when you get personal abuse from developers.
Tim Schafer. The guy comes out and says I'm a prick. I've never met him in my life – I've never had anything to do with him. I never had any involvement in the Vivendi project that they were doing, *Brütal Legend*, other than I was in one meeting where the guys looked at it and said, "He's late, he's missed every milestone, he's overspent the budget and it doesn't seem like a good game. We're going to cancel it." And do you know what? That seemed like a sensible thing to do. And it turns out, he was late, he missed every milestone, the game was not a particularly good game…

And a lot of people believe that you don't actually play games.
I don't even know how that happened! It was one of these things where I had at one time said, "Y'know, I don't play as much as I used to, I have three kids now, I'm working harder than I've ever worked before, I haven't had the time to play games the way that I would have liked to, in the way that I did in the past." And somehow that morphed into "Bobby Kotick hates games!"

This is my dream job. I've been playing games since I was 18 years old. I could have bought any company, but I bought a bankrupt

game company, and I've been doing it for 21 years. The idea that I'm not passionate about videogames is *ludicrous*. But you say something and it gets taken out of context.

In the few interviews that I gave, people were asking me: do you play games today? I didn't want to say, "Oh yeah, yeah, I play 40 hours a week of *Call Of Duty*, I can't stop…" That would just be disingenuous. I say, "I'm a single father, I pick my kids up from school and we play games together."

What do you play at home?
I've become totally fascinated with this DJ culture. But I try all of our games. Right now, I have a *Black Ops* dev kit at my house, and a 103-inch plasma screen!

Are you able to enjoy competitors' games?
For a while… I was playing *Madden*, but then I just didn't any more. We also got *Rock Band*, although more out of curiosity.

How close are you to your studios? Do you turn up and make suggestions?
If I go to Treyarch – it's the most incredibly talented studio, it knows what it's doing – I almost feel like it's presumptuous of me to give them a suggestion about a change in the game. You're not going to meet a lot of CEOs in business that feel that way, because they're hands-on, they're very active… But it *would* be presumptuous of me to go in and say, "Do this."

going to keep making physical interface products if we think that's going to enhance the experience – and we have some really cool ones for next year.

Are you excited by Move and Kinect, or 3D?
I think that 3D is super-compelling. The push has come from film but, personally, I find that live action in 3D is disruptive to the storytelling. But games in 3D are incredible. And when you see bullets whizzing past your ear, or imagine you're playing *Guitar Hero* over the internet and your bass player is right next to you, that's a really great enhancement of a game experience. I think 3D was made for videogames, and I'm very excited about that.

With Kinect… I love it as an idea, but [Microsoft has] got to get the price down. And I think developers are missing the value of the audio – nobody's done a really great job using voice as an interface, and I don't know why. I think it's something that will broaden the appeal of games.

What can you tell us about the Infinity Ward situation? Did it shake your belief in developer autonomy?
No, it shook my belief in two specific people, who were my friends. The frustrating thing about that is, the stuff that these guys did, I never would have expected them to do. We're a public company, we've got ethics obligations, and the things they did were… I would go to jail

> "The idea that I'm not passionate about videogames is ludicrous. But you say something and it gets taken out of context"

Now, that doesn't mean I don't say, "Here's a thought I have" or "What do you think about this?" Which I do. But it's not in a way that's "Hey, you *need* to go do this."

Do you think it's still completely viable to make peripheral-based games?
Well, we want to satisfy the fantasies of the consumer. So if the fantasy is to unleash your inner rock star, you need a guitar, or you need a mic, or a DJ booth. Kinect and Move are superb for dance games – we don't need to make a dance pad if you have Kinect. So as long as we think a peripheral is going to deliver something that's compelling and interesting and innovative we'll support it. For ten iterations of *Tony Hawk*, you weren't really skateboarding, it was… thumbing. And when we finally figured out how to build a skateboard – I think we probably could have done a better job on the first game, but I think we've nailed it on *Shred* – that experience, you just can't duplicate it.

To me, that's moving the medium forward, and physical interfacing I think is a really important part of the future. So, yes, we're

if I did them. You can't use the company and the company's assets for your own personal benefit, and you can't use the leverage that you might have for personal benefit – you're not allowed to do that! And so we didn't have any choice.

And we knew what the consequences would be. When we bought the company, they were 20 or 30 guys – these were guys that shared vacation homes together, they were all best friends, they were at each other's weddings. We knew that when we had to fire Jason and Vince we were going to lose a lot of really talented people. That's one of those really difficult decisions as the CEO of a company, where you step back and say, "No good is going to come of this. They're going to leave and probably have a really hard time ever being productive or successful ever again, and we're going to lose some talented people, and there's nothing we can do about it." And there wasn't.

But what I will say is there's 70 really talented people at Infinity Ward who are focused and engaged – and in the last six months, we've had something like 5,000 resumes, so it's not like there's a shortage of interest in working there. It's one of those things where you get personally disappointed in people you trust and call friends. When you're betrayed by your friends, what do you do?

We ran an article on EA last issue, and Frank Gibeau said he wants to take back the military FPS crown. How do you react to his confidence? He's keen to talk up EA's chances in this rivalry.
I don't think there's a rivalry. Look, EA has a lot of resources, it's a big company that's been in business for a long time, maybe it'll figure it out eventually. But it's been struggling for a really long time. The most difficult challenge it faces today is: great people don't really want to work there. It's like, if you have no other option, you might consider them. They have some… the team that makes *Madden* is a really great team, it's been able to manage, capture and keep some good people. But we have no shortage of opportunity to recruit out of EA – that's their biggest challenge: its stock options have no value. It's lost its way. And until it has success, and hits, and gets that enthusiasm back for the company, it's going to have a struggle getting really talented people, which is going to translate into less-than-great games.

Where do you see Activision in five years?
The commitment to making great games and satisfying our audiences – that's not going away. There are so many interesting new technologies, new opportunities, new ways to engage people that we didn't have five years ago. There's more growth opportunity and more ways to move the medium forward. And [to] get to new levels of creative excellence. And inspire the developers to new ideas. Could you have imagined, five years ago, that you would be able to put on a headset and play against another person over the internet, and do it in a way that it's a really social experience? Just adding the social experience has completely changed the medium. When you start to think about all these new physical interfaces and how much more broadening they have made the medium…

And have you seen the facial animation in [*Call Of Duty*] *Black Ops*? It's unlike anything that's been done before. What that will lead to is the ability to have [a] story and characters and an emotional connection with the character onscreen that you've never had before. And what does that do to broadening the appeal and changing the medium?

And then you've got things like Facebook – a whole new platform with 500 million users that you have an opportunity to develop new kinds of games for. I've been in this business over 20 years and I don't remember a time when there was more of an opportunity to move videogames forward and broaden the appeal – and also to satisfy our core consumers with really interesting new ideas. I think when you look at this [industry] five years from now, I think you'll be surprised at how much bigger videogames are.





Illustration: Vasili Zorin



FREE-TO-PLAY GAMING HAS EVOLVED FROM EXPERIMENTAL BEGINNINGS TO BECOME A GLOBE-SPANNING PHENOMENON, CREATING LANDS OF OPPORTUNITY FOR PLAYERS AND DEVELOPERS ALIKE. WE SET OUT TO SURVEY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT'S NEW REALMS

On paper, it sounds like business suicide. Offer up the core of your gameworld and a wealth of its content for free, to anyone willing to give it a taste test. Its roots are in the '90s, an extension of the razor blades business model, emerging in gaming from the need to combat piracy in certain territories. It found its way into the west most memorably in Jagex's *RuneScape*, an MMORPG that launched, completely free for registrants, in 2001.

Free-to-play is a draw for one big reason: the numbers add up. Professional research body DFC Intelligence recently claimed huge figures for free-to-play microtransaction revenues. Taking client-based titles as a primary focus, lead analyst **David Cole** pulls back the curtain on a new world of sales: "For those [free-to-play] games that target English-speaking countries, generally meaning the US first, followed by the UK, we estimate 2009 sales were $249 million, with

62 per cent North America, 35 per cent Europe. By 2015 we expect that to grow to about $2 billion."

To rephrase that: 700 per cent growth in five years' time. To put this into context: an industry forecast, in the midst of recession, for monstrous growth. And apparently that's a conservative estimate. Free-to-play users in the west are only just being eased into this new model of payment, and there are other barriers that will presumably fade in the coming months and years. Bandwidth, for example. Compared to Korea, where the free-to-play fuse was lit, average broadband speeds in the UK and US are slow. Specialist server provider Akamai showed – in its State Of The Internet report for Q4 2009 – that the US's average connection speed was 3.8 megabits per second; compare that with South Korea and Japan's 11.7 and 7.6, respectively. In light of this, it's no surprise that the west has been (literally) slow on the free-to-play uptake.

Cole can see the game changing, though, however slowly: "We think that gradually many of these barriers will start to disappear. Broadband will improve and companies like Pando Networks are making large downloads easier. Companies like Disney and Warner Bros are looking at these



With the upcoming browser-based *Battlestar Galactica Online*, developer Bigpoint is upping the ante for what's possible in the free-to-play world

products as part of a potential transmedia strategy, where they can use these games as a way to promote core franchises."

The Entertainment Merchants Association may have found 80 to 90 per cent of 2009's game sales were on disc-based media rather than digitally distributed, but such findings ignore digital goods and their massive increase in revenue. Researchers VGMarket and PlaySpan – a company dedicated to implementing virtual monetisation systems – recently published a study of spending on virtual goods in a range of territories (excluding Japan, Korea and China). Responses were taken from 2,221 people using three main avenues – PlaySpan's own Marketplace and Ultimate Game cards, and social network giant Facebook. It gives a snapshot of spending trends for the month of June this year. Unsurprisingly, PayPal is the preferred payment for digital goods: an established global system and an easy, secure gateway to microtransactions for



Author of the book Changing The Game, David Edery was the worldwide games portfolio manager for Xbox Live Arcade

Is it any wonder, then, that some of the biggest players on the MMOG circuit are themselves building free-to-play into their titles? What's surprising is how quickly it can turn existing properties around. Labelled a hybrid rather than a bolt-on, it was

INDUSTRY OPINION:

IAN BOGOST

PROFESSOR AT GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY



"When you make gameplay optional – something that can be bought out or bought around – then it shouldn't come as any surprise that the gameplay would suffer. A game whose playing is optional is a perversity, but for some reason nobody seems willing to see it that way, perhaps because developers are so giddy with their new-found popularity among nieces and mothers. Imagine a film you didn't have to watch […] or a meal you didn't have to eat. That's what we've got."

"COMPANIES LIKE DISNEY ARE LOOKING AT THESE PRODUCTS AS PART OF A POTENTIAL TRANSMEDIA STRATEGY, WHERE THEY CAN USE THESE GAMES AS A WAY TO PROMOTE CORE FRANCHISES"

discerning first-timers. More revelatory is that MMOGs came out on top for spends to a thirdparty (separate from payments to the network itself), and raked in an average of $35 a month from each user. But here's the real kicker: although firstparty social networks led the overall charge, with a whopping $50 reaped from users for the month, not far behind were the tied categories of MMOG, casual (read: browser) and free-to-play exclusive games ($40).

It's a sign, perhaps, that these categories are the triumvirate of free-to-play, and certainly on shared financial ground; most spending overall was on in-game currency, virtual gifts and wearables. When canvassing that same sample as to which types of online games they spent most on in the last 12 months, free-to-play was way out in front, with 45 per cent compared to social networks' 32 per cent. It's a signal of the free-to-play explosion in the west of the past year – one that's coincided with an overall drop in many traditional MMOG subscription bases and the high-profile collapse of traditional MMOG models, such as that of *Tabula Rasa*.

Turbine's turnaround of *Dungeons & Dragons Online*, from flagging subs-only MMORPG to free-to-play, that saw the title and studio become poster-children for the massive possibilities of the strategy. With an increase of over 100 per cent in subscriber base since the June 2009 announcement of *DDO*'s



INDUSTRY OPINION:

CEDRIC GERARD

INTERNATIONAL MARKETING MANAGER, ANKAMA



"The future will probably come from the symbiosis between an accessible business model and efficient game design, probably offering an hybrid model. Whether it will happen on PC, Mac, mobile or consoles… who knows? If you buy another item, I may be able to tell you more."

INDUSTRY OPINION:
BJORN BOOK-LARSSON
CHIEF OPERATING AND TECHNICAL OFFICER, GAMERSFIRST



"If you think of anything in the real world, it's a shop. A grocery store is a shop. I'll share some statistics: 90 per cent of our players never pay us a penny. They earn in-game currency like frequent flyer points, then they spend those points on power-ups. One of the drawbacks of free-to-play is that we actually have to serve ten times the audience that had to go pay for the game up-front. What it does mean is that over time we have a larger retention; you're much less likely to leave the game as you build up a circle of friends."



MKZ from GamersFirst is an online FPS touted as 'Next Generation Battlefield Combat'. What surprises most is the solid engine and the variety on offer

CASE STUDY: BIGPOINT
Who's playing, and for how long?

Bigpoint's growth in registrations

- 2006: 2,617,192
- 2007: 10,100,432
- 2008: 34,189,154
- 2009: 52,743,234
- 2010 (to end of August): 86,381,000

Average time spent per day playing browser games (Bigpoint survey of 17,000)

- Never to 1/2 hour – 3%
- 1/2 hour to 1 hour – 7%
- 1 hour to 2 hours – 15%
- 2 hours to 3 hours – 20%
- 3 hours to 6 hours – 26%
- More than 6 hours – 27%

Demographics of Bigpoint users

US	UK	POLAND	TURKEY
14% female	28% female	45% female	8% female
86% male	72% male	55% male	92% male

hybridisation, and with the average spending of each VIP (aka subscribing) user doubled since the introduction of the *DDO* store, it's the success story that has caught the attention of the big-timers. Codemasters has recruited Turbine to work similar magic on *Lord Of The Rings Online*, as vice president **David Solari** explains: "It was doing fine as a subscription title but we'd already taken two boxed retail subscription MMOGs free-to-play, with *RF Online* and *Archlord*. We saw revenues double. It was clearly a way to make the game more popular and make more money out of it. Turbine had a similar story with *DDO* in the US. The obvious step was to do the same with *LOTRO*."

Free-to-play MMOG investment is no last-chance gamble, especially not on this scale. The business case is sound, and is founded on the principle that the few will support the many, as Solari outlines: "There's good theory behind why item sales can return more than subscriptions. Item sales lets players pay as much as they want to pay. You get maybe five, ten per cent of people who'll pay something, but then there's one per cent who are so into it they'll spend a significant amount. Generally speaking, the overall return – because of the broader customer base – is higher."

Karl Mehta is the co-founder and CEO of PlaySpan, and his eyes have been drawn to one particular factor in its study: the more even demographic spread this market is attracting. "What's remarkable is that only a small percentage of players are actually paying, but they are spending

INDUSTRY OPINION:
JON-ENEE MERRIEX
PRODUCER, GAMERSFIRST



"There's never been a conscious effort to make our games addictive, like a drug. All our games focus on that community and friendship aspect. I think a lot of the time people throw around that term 'addictive' and they don't understand what that term actually means. Especially in the media, there seems to be a lack of understanding that the core component of most of these games – especially online games – is interpersonal interaction."



David Cole of DFC Intelligence expects the free-to-play market to grow to $2 billion in 2010

INDUSTRY OPINION:
KARL MEHTA
CO-FOUNDER AND CEO, PLAYSPAN



"The influx [of female players] is a direct result of the social network demographics and the casual games developed for those platforms. Pogo demonstrated years ago that females will play and pay for games. Facebook and its game developers have simply created a playground for more females to experience the fun of playing online games."

INDUSTRY OPINION:
MAX SCHAEFER
CO-FOUNDER, RUNIC GAMES



"We want to be very clever about the things we charge for, and make it so they make it easier to level – and quicker, maybe – but you still have to do it. One cool item we have planned is selling maps to special dungeons. They'll take you to a special dungeon that will have certain special attributes. It could have better magic drops, maybe more champion monsters. The cool thing about doing the map thing is that you can bring your whole party with you. So they all benefit from the map and only one person has to buy it. It joins up the community of paying players and free players and everyone wins."



Bigpoint produces *Farmerama* (top) and *Poisonville* (above), which promises thousands of players together in one 3D environment. It's a bold attempt to mimic the sandbox gameplay of *GTA*

a great deal, as our recent reports pointed out," he says. "In addition, the demographics are expanding to include older players and more females who are buying digital goods."

The uptake of microtransactions by female users is one of the under-exposed driving forces behind the advent of free-to-play. It's one that Bigpoint, a company founded in 2002 and dedicated to browser games including the *GTA*-alike *Poisonville*, has discovered is underpinning its successes with games such as *Farmerama*. In that title, a browser spin on *Farmville*, 70 per cent of the audience was found to be female (averaged across numerous territories, from Germany, with 42 per cent female players, to the US with 14 per cent and Poland with 45 per cent), with half of those over 30 years old – a massive divergence from the trend of massmarket gaming. For all the trumpet-blowing over console games attracting a wider audience, free-to-play's pull has been equally strong for a wider demographic.

A major concern for MMOG players is that the paying few, with items designed to speed up progress and levelling, can both cheapen the manual grind of the many and unbalance the in-game economy. Solari is forthcoming about the advantages granted to a paying user: "Someone who pays is always going to have some advantages: they're going to be able to progress a lot quicker because they don't have the time but do have the money." But he's also adamant that the two tribes of user can, and should, co-exist: "I'm sure they [subscribers] do want the free players on the servers – even if they say they don't. It means it's easier to get a group, a raid – it's a bigger community that's constantly being replenished. The free players can help the payers as well – they're mining and finding lots of stuff that the top-end players would want, which will make it easier for them to get because there's more of it."

Aaron Campbell, producer of *LOTRO*, believes that the line between free and subscription users is blurring: "There's an active debate in the *LOTRO* beta forums about who users want to be. They can't make up their minds and that – to me – means I'm doing my job. The punchline is: when you offer more options, opportunities to explore, when you reduce the barrier, you increase your subscriber base."

INDUSTRY OPINION:
AARON CAMPBELL
PRODUCER ON *LOTRO*, TURBINE



"Players are sensitive to any item that can give an advantage. We're explicitly focused on things that will speed up and enhance your game. [With free-to-play] we can make that trade-off between the wallet and the clock. A lot of us have families now; we have less time."



Browser-based games, which can be played without installation, are increasing in popularity, but client-based games such as *Lord Of The Rings Online* (above) are maintaining huge playerbases




GamersFirst's *Sword 2* is derivative, but that's largely the point of many free-to-play titles, seeking to offer traditional and familiar thrills for limited outlay

INDUSTRY OPINION:
DAVID SOLARI
VICE PRESIDENT, CODEMASTERS



"We launched *Archlord* two years ago with a hybrid [payment] model and had massively negative feedback, so we backed off. Players didn't want that. Over the last three or four years, microtransactions have become a more acceptable model [in the west]."

INDUSTRY OPINION:
PATRICK STREPPEL
HEAD OF MARKETING AND PRODUCT MANAGEMENT, GAMIGO



"Compared to boxed products, free-to-play MMOGs are a service. There's no quick cashing in on day one; quality and polishing are key. In order to survive in this market – with Asian MMOGs that have high-end graphics, CryEngine 2 or Unreal 3-powered, and massive content, with over 100 people in average Chinese teams – western studios need to differentiate with a unique scenario, innovative gameplay and a high degree of polishing."

"THE BOTTOM LINE IS THAT IF YOU'RE ONLY GOING TO CONVERT FIVE PER CENT OF YOUR ACTIVE USERS TO PAYING USERS, THEN YOU WANT TO GIVE THOSE PEOPLE EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO PAY YOU"

This hybridisation approach isn't necessarily a perfect solution. Many free-to-play exclusive developers and publishers believe the model has to be integrated from the earliest days of building a game; that it has to be a proactive rather than retrospective design. GamersFirst is a long-running free-to-play developer and distributor, and chief operating/technical officer **Bjorn Book-Larsson** explains the science of free-to-play world-building: "One of the things western designers struggle with is that when you're designing a free-to-play, you have to do it from the ground up. You're essentially creating a real-world economy that has all the components like inflation and reward systems – they're in the DNA of the game – and if you don't do it right you will screw it up." GamersFirst has been a pioneer of bringing free-to-play titles to various global markets and has learned one lesson in particular in tailoring the model to a western audience: "One of the modifications we did in the western market with these games is westerners like to buy bundles, so we did premium packages. Some [games] were initially focused on just individual purchases, but essentially westerners tend to buy these bundles for $9.95 or $29.95, so it's not a subscription but it's similar; a bundle you can pre-purchase, so that for the next 30 days you get a bonus if you buy this bundle with extra XP or other components. It's more focused on getting you to buy a few little things initially, then when you've gotten addicted to it we say: 'Here, great, here's a bundle'. We call it the premium."

If talk of getting an audience addicted raises an ethical eyebrow, the approach to monetisation is where the arguments happen. **David Edery** is the manager of Fuzbi, a consulting firm focused on the design of online games. He understands that going after the money is the prerogative of many developers, as he writes on his blog, Game Tycoon: "Why is it worthwhile to at least consider the merits of designing a game with a more aggressive monetisation model? It all comes down to conversion rates. The average western free-to-play game is lucky to convert five per cent of active users to paying users. At the low end, you get one per cent conversion rates, which is where games like *Farmville* and *Mafia Wars* tend to sit. Some very rare games reach 20 per cent or better, but to hit that level you generally need a fair bit of luck, an incredibly powerful brand and/or an intensely loyal niche audience. Bottom line: if you're only going to convert five per cent of your active users to paying users, you want to give those people every opportunity to pay you! Many of them will be delighted to do so if you handle the situation appropriately."

Torchlight developer Runic Games is the next studio stepping up to the batting plate. Its challenge will be to convert an audience wooed by a one-off payment for the original to the free-to-play model it's introducing in *Torchlight II*. Co-founder **Max Schaefer** is grounded about the potential pitfalls of free-to-play: "You know, there's really no way to get money from people in a way that they like. So I think that [responses have] been mixed, but mixed in a good way. A lot of people realise that it's a legitimate model, it just depends on how you implement it. It's something people really screw up. But if you do it right, it works for everyone."

The online world of microtransactions is a shared power, one harnessed by dedicated console developers and browser-game publishers alike. For the future – and reputation – of free-to-play to maintain its current strength, it'll need to be handled with care and consideration by those who choose to implement it. And though we may only just be identifying the sprawling, worldwide ripple that started in the east, many companies may already be too late to the party. Zynga's shutdown of free-to-play Facebook title *Street Racing*, initially without reimbursement for consumers, showed that with popularity and profit should also come a responsibility to consumer investment. The bottom line, regardless of the literal title of this new breed of monetisation, is that it's ultimately about value for money. Value for the user, for the developer's investment of time and finance, and a feeling that what's worth having is worth paying for.




Most Anticipated MMO in 2009
КРИ 2009
ЛУЧШАЯ ИГРА
КРИ 2009
ALLODS
ONLINE
ALLODS ONLINE
WHICH ENEMIES WILL YOU DEFEAT TODAY?
Register, download and play today at
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Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

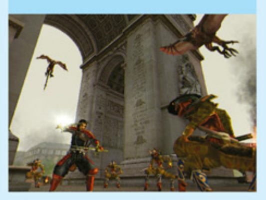
Edge's most played

Pure



Split Second's campaign exhausted, it's time to go back to Black Rock's offroad simulator. Boosting and tricking sensibly is an art. Catching big, crazy HD air is a pleasure.
360, PS3, DISNEY

Onimusha 3



A most confident stab at an east-west crossover, it's worth booting up just for that opening cinematic. The satisfying hacking, slashing and orb-gathering is a bonus.
PS2, CAPCOM

StarCraft II



It's still Terran time as we shave the seconds off our initial build orders. Games often begin the same way: it's the tiny differences in style that make those first minutes so tense.
PC, BLIZZARD

Too much of a Reach

The story behind the missing review



It's not difficult to be impressed by *Halo: Reach*'s jetpack propulsion, but the many layers Bungie has built into the overall experience cannot be properly assessed without some serious play

This month there's a notable absence from Review – *Halo: Reach*. But fear not, there's still plenty here in the way of big hitters, including MercurySteam's reinvention of *Castlevania*, Ninja Theory's *Enslaved*, Firaxis' *Civilization V* and Blue Castle's *Dead Rising 2*.

We couldn't include *Halo: Reach* within these pages because we weren't able to spend enough time with it. As is now common with launches of a certain scale, pre-release access was arranged as a review session in the form of an afternoon and evening offering up to 13 hours of potential playtime.

Such events have become fixtures on the calendar. Games like *Reach* have much resting on their success, and their profile attracts those gagging to ruin their surprises or, in the worst case scenario, distribute them illegally. That Microsoft doesn't want to hand out hundreds of copies weeks before release, relying on good faith and non-disclosure agreements, is understandable.

Limiting the time a reviewer can spend with a game and throwing in a few expensive canapés could clearly be seen as a bid to boost its Metacritic average. Conspiracy theorists will always debate such things, but ultimately trifles, and vol-au-vents, don't matter – the game does. That's why one-size-fits-all review events often do games a disservice. *Alan Wake*, a one-off experience lasting ten to 12 hours, could be reasonably reviewed in such a manner. But it doesn't work for *Halo: Reach*.

The game's true greatness or otherwise lies in its breadth. It's our view that charging through the campaign mode and squeezing in a handful of hours of local multiplayer fails to provide enough insight. We're talking about no Forge, Theatre, Firefight, multiplayer levelling, difficulty scaling, co-op. No time to explore.

So we decided to review *Halo: Reach* post-release, take in some of its flavour in the wild, and try to get it right. The game looks like a fitting finale for Bungie's series stewardship, but for our full conclusions, based on extensive play, head to our website.

Whatever review scenarios are proposed in the future, we'll deal with them on a game-by-game basis. Videogaming's old rules are changing, but we'll try to deal with it while remaining true to traditional values.

Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3
PUBLISHER: KONAMI **DEVELOPER:** MERCURYSTEAM
RELEASE: OCTOBER 8 **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E207, E217, E219









An assault on a witch lair provides some of the game's most striking interiors. The transition from outer walls to inner sanctum is seamless, aided no doubt by the background loading opportunities of the story being told in short levels

For Bram Stoker's Count Dracula, first impressions were the secret to ensnaring his prey. Luring in the vulnerable with an innocuous appearance, the Count was a master of mimicry, and so too is MercurySteam's take on the *Castlevania* legend in 3D.

The copy is almost flawless. For its first six hours *Lords Of Shadow* is *God Of War III* with Greek mythology swapped out for gothic folk tales. Goblins, Wargs, Lycans, a talking horse and giant eagle: all stand in suitably for Medusa and co. Even Belmont's chained crucifix is a dead ringer for Kratos' tethered blades, swinging you from ledge to ledge, spinning whirlwinds of fiery death and, of course, staking a claim in the chests of the damned.

It's almost a shock when the vamps do rear their ugly heads. So engrossed is *Lords Of Shadow* in the gothic horror realm (a visit to Frankenstein's electric lab is a highlight) that you wonder if this new developer has forgotten about the series' legacy altogether. It may be a result of Kojima Productions changing the course of the project partway through its development, but it's arguably to the game's benefit that the iconic candle-lit castles are reserved for the final, climactic third. When MercurySteam does get its teeth into Konami's canon, it doesn't hold back. Goblins and ghouls are exchanged for winged bloodsuckers and devils, brought to life with a brilliant artistic eye for the gruesome and ghastly.

Platforming and cutscenes are used to break up the hack'n'slash monotony into shards of adrenal joy. Traversing icy death to reach the looming, gigantic castle is a dazzling and foreboding scene: scaling the vertiginous outer reaches is exhilarating, with regular nods to the two-dimensional past framing leaps and swings beautifully. It's at this point that you realise the opening segment, brimming with an ensemble of brilliantly designed and animated creatures, was just an epic sightseeing tutorial.

Combat, as his Belmont blood prescribes, is protagonist Gabriel's raison d'etre. With all the items, magic and weapons in his arsenal, he's a joy to work with. Light and Shadow magic are toggled to either heal or devastate (a similar system to *Dodonpachi*'s Slaughter and Menace mechanic – see p97) and it means that for every medieval maniac there's a chance to regroup and revive with careful resource management. Combos can run ridiculously long, slicing and dicing gangs of enemies until stunned, before opening them up to a button-bashing finisher.



Combos can run ridiculously long, slicing and dicing gangs of enemies until stunned, before opening them up to a button-bashing finisher



Boss battles are numerous and varied. None are frustrating, however, with careful planning put into each encounter and requiring attentive timing along with a match-fit thumb for bashing buttons





Two early boss encounters draw inspiration from *Shadow Of The Colossus*. Each one towers far above, raining rocky hell on your comparatively diminutive demon-slayer

By not taking any major gameplay chances, *Lords Of Shadow* manages to get most of the fundamentals right. The camera is an occasional inconvenience, however, with its fixed perspective often rendering you helpless against offscreen projectiles, and the lack of a firstperson mode is a bane in some of the puzzle rooms. It's forgivable thanks to the range of moves and upgrades at your disposal, though, bought with currency earned from missions and puzzles.

In a structural concession to the *Castlevania* series, the story is broken up into bite-size chunks, motivated by one of the game's main incentives: replay value. On first run-through you'll likely pillage 50 per cent of its treasures, unlocking some gruelling time trials and revealing just how many items you've missed. Going back is often the best way to progress overall, particularly on the harder difficulties which demand a fully fleshed move-set and some serious holy-water-filled balls. That cutscenes can be skipped is an acknowledgement both of the need for brevity in timed replays and the fact that the cinematics are a little overwrought. The numerous scenes of Gabriel strutting through ancient map backdrops are archaic and trite, backed by a grandiose score that frames the brutal meathead as a saint purging an unholy land. While the production is never less than triple-A (Patrick Stewart providing his authoritarian tones for sidekick duties), it's never truly rousing or paid off with anything more than the usual quota of killing. There are moments of genuine craftsmanship, however, in the marrying of prerendered scenes with in-game action. Mounting one of the many beasts – Wargs being the most burly and satisfying to control – is often rewarded with a snapshot of action, like the scaling of a wall or a leap and bound over a decrepit ruin.

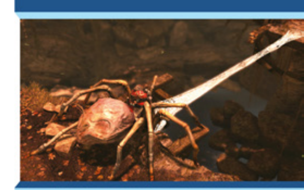
What MercurySteam's competitors keep in mind is that less can be more in a genre as relentless as this. Clocking in at around the 15 to 20 hour mark for an initial, medium-difficulty playthrough, *Lords Of Shadow* threatens to test your stamina. The variety of challenges and the curvature of the game's narrative spine help ease the pain, but it's nevertheless a relief to reach the home stretch, meaning that the encouraged replays may have to wait for your fingers to properly recover.

Nevertheless, this 3D spin on *Castlevania* is ultimately a greater success than anyone could have reasonably expected, given its unconventional origins. It's a vehicle that may win over more action fans than true-bloods, but its plagiaristic tendencies represent a shrewd way of ensuring that the series gets a firm footing outside of the 2D realm where it has enjoyed such success. **[8]**

Certain finishers are particularly nasty, Belmont surrendering his soul to a Kratos level of blood-lust (main). The range of executions is matched only by the wealth of opponents, from a mechanical scorpion to a gnashing werewolf pack



Cheeky rider



Having frazzled the competition, Belmont has the option to take some of the larger creatures as his conveyance. Each has its own abilities, from melee attacks to charging down doors, and each species is offered up when you most need them. Spinning a web-bridge is an example of the contrivances to which *Lords Of Shadow* sometimes stoops, but it's a welcome change of pace at the best of times. Furious combo flurries can in fact work against you – inadvertently killing off your required transport and triggering the summoning of another beast for your crucifix-swinging pleasure.

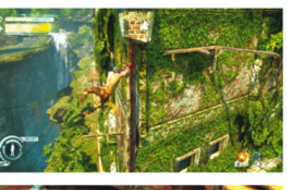


Just as in the *God Of War* series, you cannot control the camera, which swoops back from battles and zooms in for thirdperson adventuring, resulting in occasional missteps

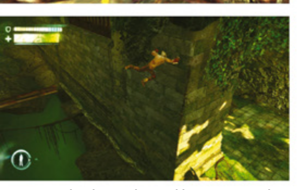


ENSLAVED: ODYSSEY TO THE WEST

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3
DEVELOPER NINJA THEORY **PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI GAMES
RELEASE: OCTOBER 8 **PREVIOUSLY IN** E208, E214, E217





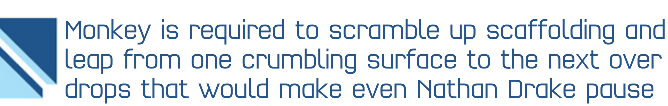


Tech orbs are dropped by enemies and found secreted around the environments. They are the currency used in *Enslaved*'s simple upgrade system, which allows players to upgrade Monkey's health and weaponry, as well as unlock new moves

Within minutes of starting *Enslaved*, players find themselves dropped in the rubble-strewn ruins of New York. A New York so rich and vibrantly coloured that you'll think someone's fiddled with the contrast settings on your TV. Years of drab and dreary slices of post-apocalyptica have left us unprepared for *Enslaved*'s take on a world without humanity. Here, a real jungle has replaced the concrete one: luminously green foliage hangs thickly on walls, and blood-red, autumnal leaves sprinkle the streets. Best of all, New York is merely the first stop on protagonist Monkey and his – not all that unkind, really – captor Trip's journey across the devastated American continent, a journey which makes stopovers at locations that should be as familiar as the depopulated city, but like it have been crafted with similar aesthetic abundance. Even when the inevitable pools of toxic waste make their appearance, Ninja Theory hasn't been able to resist dabbing them with bright splotches of colour.



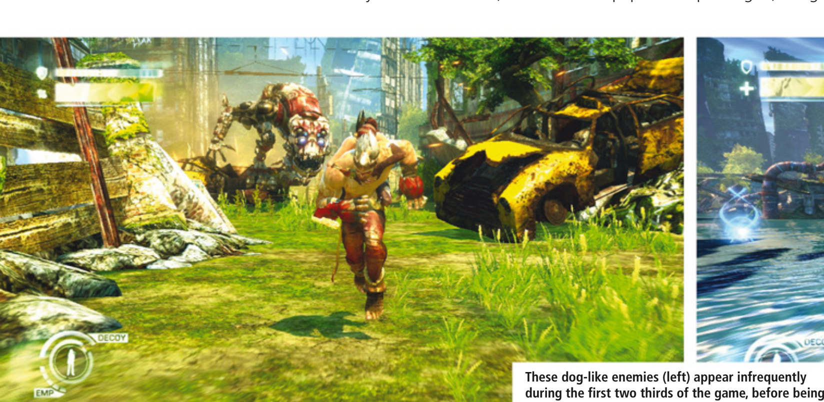
A road trip story with a large dose of buddy movie thrown in, *Enslaved* is on paper a disaster: a game-long escort mission. As Monkey, players provide the forcibly recruited brawn to Trip's brains, guiding her through the mech-infested streets of New York and the wastes beyond. Trip's a fairly capable companion, staying out of harm's way when she can, hitting mechs with a last-resort EMP when she can't. Which is handy, because enemies pack quite the metallic punch.

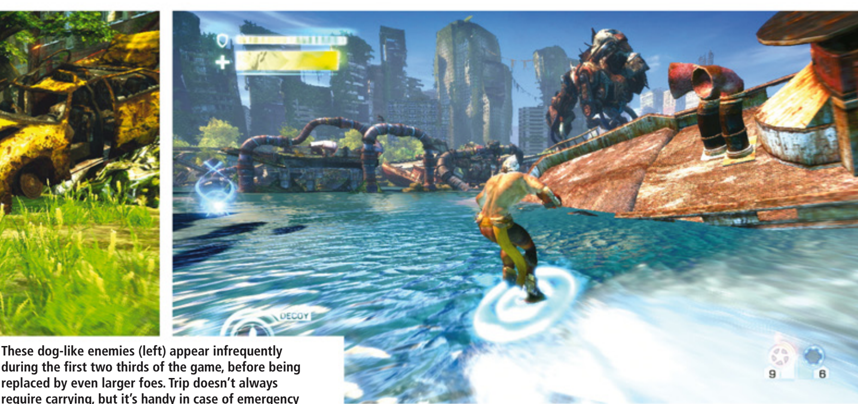


> Monkey is required to scramble up scaffolding and leap from one crumbling surface to the next over drops that would make even Nathan Drake pause

Enslaved's combat dangles constantly on the knife edge between thrilling and laborious. On normal difficulty, at least, the fabulously animated mechs (which look like gangly collections of razor blades and bowling balls but move with a lupine grace) can take just enough of a battering with Monkey's staff that, when whole packs start pouring in, things can get overwhelming quickly. Monkey has a collection of basic combos activated through a mixture of light and heavy attacks, as well as the ability to fire off standard or stunning energy rounds from his staff, but success is mostly about prioritising targets – rolling and dodging towards any foes that you can see are malfunctioning. These can be ripped apart with a takedown, granting Monkey a chance to hijack their gun-arms, or better yet a chance to fling their exploding body towards remaining enemies. Even higher priorities are the individual mechs which occasionally start a countdown that, on reaching zero, sends out a broadcast for reinforcements.

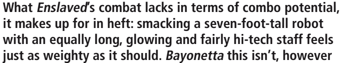
Frequently, *Enslaved* gives players a chance to plan these encounters, or bypass them altogether. When Monkey and Trip come across a room or route filled with dormant mechs, Trip will highlight their activation radius as a series of blue circles emanating from their core. On these occasions, players can plan an assault starting with the malfunctioning weak





These dog-like enemies (left) appear infrequently during the first two thirds of the game, before being replaced by even larger foes. Trip doesn't always require carrying, but it's handy in case of emergency





What *Enslaved*'s combat lacks in terms of combo potential, it makes up for in heft: smacking a seven-foot-tall robot with an equally long, glowing and fairly hi-tech staff feels just as weighty as it should. *Bayonetta* this isn't, however



A scrapyard filled with pieces of broken and incomplete mechs is the setting for the middle third of the game, packed with the giant body parts of robots



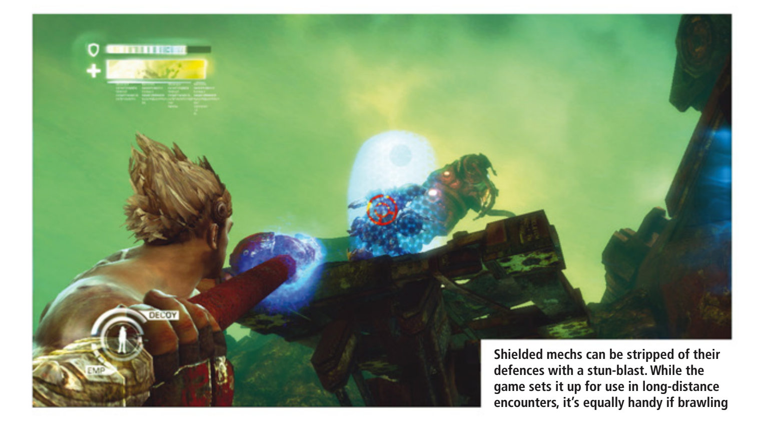


links, or attempt to creep past the group in its entirety – a strategy often complicated by the presence of a gun turret watching over the room. When under fire, players can order Trip, through a menu accessed via the left bumper, to distract mechs and turrets with a holographic decoy. In turn, players must occasionally distract distant mechs themselves before ordering Trip to break cover. In truth, these sections are more successful than *Enslaved*'s out-and-out attempts at more typical puzzles, which are all variations on the switch-pulling, bridge-turning model.

When Monkey's not fighting, he's swinging, leaping and scrabbling around the environment in a manner befitting his name. *Enslaved*'s platforming is for the most part fairly easy – graspable surfaces are given an artificial gleam which helps avoid misguided leaps but turns these sections into vertical breadcrumb trails – and requires the presence of angry mech gunfire to avoid before truly coming alive. It's these sections, however, which best show off Ninja Theory's eye for a set-piece, as Monkey is required to scramble up collapsing scaffolding and leap from one crumbling surface to the next over drops that would make even Nathan Drake pause before peering over the edge.

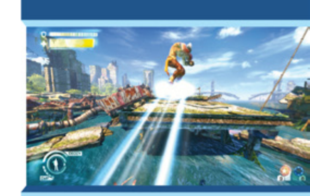
Like the *Uncharted* series, *Enslaved* is also unafraid to make the case for a rollercoaster of a story, well told. Its cutscenes are frequent, but never overlong, and feature uniformly high-calibre performances from its cast – as Monkey, Andy Serkis gives an excellent study in the 'beneath that gruff exterior he's just a big softie, really' school of likeability. If there's a flaw, it's that the basic decency of both leads means their eventual affection for one another is never really in doubt, but, as with most odysseys, it's not where they end up that counts, it's how they get there. A good thing, too, because *Enslaved*'s denouement hurriedly takes Monkey and Trip to an environment completely unlike anything the game's shown you before and serves up a leftfield plot twist in what feels like a truncated (and entirely non-interactive) epilogue.

It's worth the trip, though, because for the most part *Enslaved* takes the cinematic flair and production values Ninja Theory showcased in *Heavenly Sword* and applies them to an experience no more inventive, but certainly better executed and paced. But *Enslaved*'s greatest achievement is standing out in the crowded field of me-too, colour-sapped videogame apocalypses, serving as a vibrant oasis in the otherwise murky brown wastes. **[8]**



Shielded mechs can be stripped of their defences with a stun-blast. While the game sets it up for use in long-distance encounters, it's equally handy if brawling

Cloud time



Combat and platforming are occasionally interspersed with sections in which Monkey rides his 'cloud' (read: glowing hoverboard) around the environment. It's a zippy little device, and makes exploring some of the game's larger environments painless.

Capable of picking up speed by flying through glowing plumes of energy, the cloud comes into its own during a handful of set-piece boss fights and chase scenes. The game is unashamedly arbitrary about when it can and can't be used, however, providing a technobabble explanation undermined the moment an arena becomes cloud-friendly the very second a boss appears.







Enslaved's turret section doesn't outstay its welcome – which is to say that, thankfully, it doesn't last very long at all



DEAD RISING 2

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM **DEVELOPER:** BLUE CASTLE GAMES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E208, E209, E216





Between completing missions and rescuing survivors, Chuck must give anti-zombification drug Zombrex to daughter Katey (above). Finding her next dose is an ever-present background objective



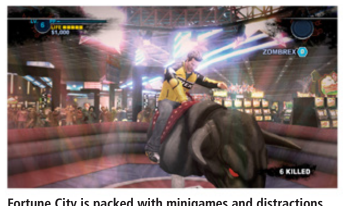
Dead Rising 2's opening act throws players in at the deep end. Its first scene – an orgiastic frenzy of zombie slaughter in which hero Chuck Greene rides around an arena packed full of shuffling undead, a pair of chainsaws attached to his motorbike – manages in a moment to outdo the first game's not inconsiderable penchant for excess. But five minutes – and one incredibly swift zombie outbreak – later, and Greene finds himself hiding out in a safe house accessed through the ventilation ducts of a shopping mall, beyond which lies an endless zombie horde, survivors to be rescued, psychopaths to be killed, and mysteries to be unravelled – not least of which is why it's taken four years to slavishly replicate the first *Dead Rising*'s template.

While that shopping mall, the Royal Flush Plaza, makes up only part of *Dead Rising 2*'s surrogate Las Vegas, Fortune City, there's another close by, and a half-constructed shopping strip towards the lower end of the region. The liberal sprinkling of moderately sized casinos, stuffed with slot machines, croupiers and showgirls, is Fortune City's most distinguishing feature when placed next to *Dead Rising*'s Willamette Mall, but it still feels like a Vegas-themed shopping centre. There's a good reason for this, of course – few settings scream End Of Civilisation like a capitalist mecca overrun and, more importantly, few environments are so easy to turn into a playground.

Dead Rising 2 isn't a sandbox; it's a toybox. There isn't a building in Fortune City that hasn't had its shelves stacked with novelty weapons, its back rooms packed with ridiculous items or its clothes rails lined with crimes against fashion. It's this sheer breadth of possibility – the fact that you can slip into an Elvis-style jumpsuit offset by a natty pair of bunny slippers before riding a child's pink tricycle through a crowd of slathering undead – that makes *Dead Rising 2*'s rough edges so tempting to forgive.

And that's before you begin making items of your own via Chuck's handyman skills, which allow players to manufacture a range of absurd weapons and items. Why bat zombies over the head with a kayak paddle when you can strap a chainsaw to each end? And do you really want to ignore that cumbersome robotic bear in the toy shop





Fortune City is packed with minigames and distractions, including this bucking bronco (above), slot machines, and even a glass booth full of fluttering cash which brings recollections of TV gameshow The Crystal Maze





As in the first game, certain zombies are host to queen versions of the parasite responsible for the outbreak. Killing royalty will result in all nearby zombies losing their heads





Not content with dispensing softcore centrefolds around *Mafia II*'s Empire City, Playboy has plastered *Dead Rising 2* with its covers, too (left). They're actually rather modest compared to the game's other risqué elements (right)

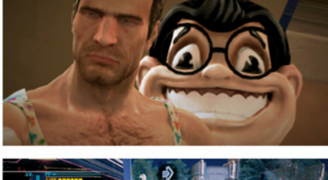


window when you can tape an assault rifle to its arm and turn it into a sentry gun? It's this last point that affects play the most: combining makes the funny-but-useless novelty items you'd try out once and forget about in the first game potentially lethal this time around. And the harder to make, sillier, and more gruesome the item, the more 'PP' (the experience points the first game awarded for taking pictures) it tends to yield, a balance that rewards experimentation.

While pre-release discussion has focused on Blue Castle's tweaking of *Dead Rising*'s save system – removing the one-slot-per-playthrough limit – this has come alongside a more subtle, but crucial, alteration to the dynamics of the game. *Dead Rising* would force players to choose between side-quests placed at opposite ends of the map, a countdown ticking all the while, and its save system ensuring players committed to whichever choice they made. *Dead Rising 2*'s more lenient. There's just enough time to investigate every lead sent your way, and even if there's not, the presence of extra save slots means you'll probably still try, the fear of saving too far from your next story mission having been entirely removed. Players can easily spend the entire game running from objective to objective, never becoming as intimate with the weapon- and in-joke-packed nooks and crannies of Fortune City as the periods of dead time in the first game (where you'd turn up ten minutes early for an objective, just in case) encouraged you to be.



Slip into an Elvis-style jumpsuit offset by a natty pair of bunny slippers before riding a child's pink tricycle through a crowd of slathering undead





While bikes can be customised with a DIY paintjob and weaponry, the Wheelchair Tank is our vehicle of choice, allowing Greene to recline as he tears his foes to shreds

And yet that save system is still strict enough to make boss encounters a pain. While *Dead Rising 2*'s cast of psychotic survivors are no less colourful than those in the original game, they're also no less frustrating. Controlling Greene can begin to feel awkward when a maniac with a shard of glass is leaping around the room, and while some DIY weaponry can even the odds, in the early stages players are left to a levelling system which randomly doles out health upgrades and inventory space to determine how well-prepared for an encounter they can actually be. On occasion, the secret to defeating a boss can be found close by – a water gun can dampen a maniac with a flamethrower, for instance, but even then the process is one of trial and error, and rarely fun. Zombie fiction dictates that it's other humans, and not the undead, who provide *Dead Rising 2*'s greatest threats, but the bikers in Dawn Of The Dead never trapped survivors in cheap animation loops. The one occasion a psychopath offers something other than a boss fight is a highlight almost by default.

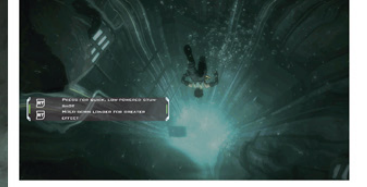
Tolerate the bosses, however, and you will have made it through the worst that *Dead Rising 2* has to offer, but it's hard to ignore the fact that its flaws – which also include poor vehicle handling and some rather uninspired mission design – were all shared by the 2004 game. But like the walking corpses populating its gaudy plazas, *Dead Rising 2*'s features are nothing individually but prove to be irresistible en masse, with an intoxicatingly broad range of things to see, items to find, minigames to play, weapons to make and jokes to laugh at. Plenty of games can be as awkward or frustrating as *Dead Rising 2*, but none are as insanely, violently, engagingly bonkers. **[7]**

Reality bites



While players can later build the zombie-hacking chopper which appears in *Dead Rising 2*'s first scene (above), the gameshow Terror Is Reality is far from being the focus of the full game. Instead, it forms a collection of Gladiators-esque minigames which make up *Dead Rising 2*'s competitive multiplayer mode. Players compete to rack up the highest number of zombie kills in a short time limit, with the prize money made carrying over the singleplayer game. The game also features drop-in, drop-out co-op, which allows you and a friend to enjoy the gory slapstick of Fortune City together.







Scaling an elevator shaft is an early highlight. Having to dive back into it soon after, estimating your remaining breath without an oxygen meter, however, is far less thrilling. Cover can only be used with your weapon drawn, which is a needless annoyance that regularly confuses and leads to you diving over, not behind, cover when you forget to draw



HYDROPHOBIA

FORMAT: 360 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER: DARK ENERGY DIGITAL **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E175, E214



Wilson's apartment is one of your brief encounters with a well-lit environment, a suitable opener by which to measure the horrors that come in the dark, dank flooded hallways of floating city Queen Of The World

When water is introduced in a game, it's usually done so through the filter of a simple adjustment to gravity and character animation. Think deep-sea scavenging in Mario's Jolly Roger Bay or Lara Croft's awkward, linear cave diving. With its adaptable, formless properties, it's more regularly been the enemy of game design than its accomplice, but with *Hydrophobia* an attempt has been made to make water count, to make it affect your journey through a thirdperson shooter – and, at the very least, to represent it accurately.

Dark Energy has succeeded on the latter count. When channelled by an exploding wall section or granted entry by an opened door, the water of *Hyrdophobia* gushes, laps and lurches through the corridors of the ill-fated city-on-the-sea that is your home for this first XBLA episode. Rather than face the challenge of a flooded hallway or rising water level, however, you'll be worrying about your battle with the shift in contrast and the awkward camera angling as you transition from the dull grey walls of the dry environments to the murky blur below the surface. Realism might be the defence, at the cost of being bland and confusing.

Remove water from the equation and you're left with a sub-par, archaic thirdperson actioner. Seeking out keys and scanning for door codes in the dreary, indistinguishable tunnels – occasionally offing a few identical NPCs who are constantly looking the other way – is grind-work after the first of three repetitive acts. Combat (you have one weapon, an energy pistol) is unresponsive and tiresome, and charging your weapon to repeatedly shoot an unconscious foe's body is a poor substitute for an actual enemy engagement of substance.

The trimmings do little to sweeten the deal. A relentless backing score aurally mirrors the misjudged pace and derivative tones of the overall journey. Protagonist Kate Wilson is a forgettable nonentity as she whines and wails her way through every linear section. The maps themselves are multi-tiered chores that require little initiative to navigate, the storytellers all too eager to intervene with a directional soundbite or, worse, a piece of the story that involves hackneyed terrorists and a perpetually raving, arrogant Scottish mentor.

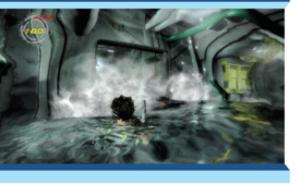
The bugs that inhabit the waters of *Hydrophobia* are another concern. Ranging from fatal scenery clipping to an awkward inventory display that implies a lack of ammunition until a weapon is equipped, it indicates a title either unfinished, unpolished or simply unprepared for a world of digitally delivered games that is home to such robust titles as *Shadow Complex* and *Lara Croft And The Guardian Of Light*.

An experience lacking flavour, with a transparent design, the game shares many qualities with its elemental subject matter. It is entering a super-competitive environment, and its premium DLC will need to be something special to turn things around. **[3]**

Character animations transition awkwardly as the water level changes. A sprint through a corridor can quickly become a swim as the area is flooded by a stray bullet greeting a gas pipe and unleashing watery hell



There's something in the water



Battling through the three acts of the story mode unlocks the Challenge Room. It's an excuse to hand control of the water physics over to the user and take down a series of enemies in time-attack waves. As dumbed-down as it is – the left-trigger initiates a tower of water with which to trap objects and then throw them – it at least brings back fond memories of the psy-centric, and massively superior, PS2-era titles *Second Sight* and *Psi-Ops*. Ultimately it feels like a bulked-up tech demo, the real challenge proving to be navigating the awkward angles and incompetent enemies the scenario serves up.



SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION V

FORMAT: PC **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES **DEVELOPER:** FIRAXIS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E214

The *Civilization* series' fifth game marks its first real revolution – and it's not to be velvet. The military success that once came by rolling together a ball of units and unleashing it as a tumbleweed of conquest now sees each grid point only able to house one battalion, and ranged attacks actually working over distance. Martial law has become a viable and satisfyingly convoluted way to run your nascent empire.

The biggest cosmetic shift is visible on the map: grid spaces have softened into hexagons. It's an arbitrary switch, but with the spotlight set on armed conflict, the hex-based board feels like a more authentic wargame, making it easier to corral and constrict an invading enemy in occupied, defensible positions.

But this is no full-on battle simulator. Firaxis has stopped short of modelling supply lines and army rations – a unit, once created, exists forever on the board until destroyed. Proposing an attack with that unit shows the exact cost of success, but press F to fortify an idling set of soldiers and they'll increase their numbers over a series of turns until they're back at full strength.

And this strength is entirely necessary for taking *Civ V*'s most precious resource: cities. The aim is to whittle a city's health down to an invasion-weak level, before waltzing friendly units in to do one of three things: annex, install a puppet government or raze the lot. Each has its own genuine application, rewarding more expansive empires with pre-made land, or letting rampaging warlords skip all that management junk. Once on the warpath, it's tough to stop: human leaders will cultivate the kind of irrational hatred of AI figures that can only be scratched by a particularly bloody and satisfying invasion.

Not that governance ever becomes a chore. *Civ V* is almost dangerously streamlined, its default settings enough to ensure a happy, growing city. Set workers to auto-improve and they'll potter around your territory, setting up farms and roads. Fiddling with the specific hexagons that supply a city is possible for the die-hard tile-monger, but the number-crunching doesn't go very deep. Taxation is non-existent, and the population is simplified down to a single face, smiling and expanding when happy; grumpy and stagnating when annoyed.

It's a system that lacks fine-tuned control, but remains easily swayed. A city upset by overcrowding is distracted by the inclusion of a colosseum, the civilisation-wide bonus boosting warm and fuzzy feelings across the land. So too can the populace be cheered with sudden governmental swings: decoding the concepts behind democracy cheers your humble civvies no end. Deployed last-second, these switches can alter the course of history, a relieving helping hand to wrest an ailing civilisation back on track.

Timely scientific research, too, can yank a culture up by its bootstraps. Research is nakedly targeted toward a specific goal – perusing an expansive tech tree, rulers can elect to have their scientific pathways set for the next 6,000 years by setting their sights on one breakthrough.

Constructing buildings and wonders in cities under your command will increase certain values: gold, scientific understanding, speed of unit production and similar. Chase a specific target – say, a war chariot – and the game informs you how many production points it'll cost. Equate this with how many points that city makes in a turn, and you'll understand the neat system *Civilization V* uses to invent its ETAs across the board.

Civilization V's revolution is daring for a series built on expansion. It strips and pares away, making management easy and command enjoyable. There's a game here for countless players – the general, the tinkerer, the builder. Ultimately, all will find themselves uttering the same *Civilization* mantra: "Just one more turn". **[9]**

Siege weapons like trebuchets come in the mid-section of a game, and need to be set up before firing. They can launch missiles over a number of tiles, but are weak. Later on, cannons and artillery drastically increase damage, and turn long-range weaponry into an anti-infantry tool

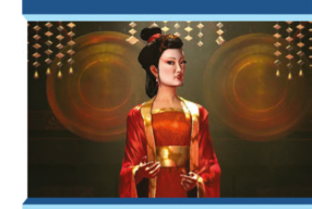


Wonders yield specific bonuses, based on their use. Once a wonder has been constructed, no other player can craft it. Some civilisations get a boost to wonder production, ideal for dealing with city states that'll sometimes ask for a new wonder in return for their favour



Victory conditions can be set at the start of a game. Conquest sees you kill everyone else, while a research victory depends on outstripping opponents' science capabilities and understanding the concept of 'future tech' first. Then flying off the planet you helped craft

State of mine



Proper early-game exploration shows three types of peer. Uncover a fellow empire's border and they'll engage courteously in discussion. Spot a barbarian encampment and they'll go for you, threatened and violent. But spy a city state – a single settlement that refuses to expand – and a new option is opened. City states can be pleased and offended, varying their reactions to you from vassals to enemies. From time to time they'll ask for something, often putting a hit out on another city. Destroy it, or aid their efforts, and they'll be indebted to you, providing cash and units. Pledge to protect them and they're a useful inroad to a sneaky declaration of war, as well as a distraction for a weakened foe.



SPORTS CHAMPIONS

FORMAT: PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE **DEVELOPER:** ZINDAGI GAMES

Dress for success



Each event has cups to complete, and various unlocks. You'll end up flicking through costumes to pick your favourite before uncomfortably settling, even though the effects are purely cosmetic. The challenge modes are unlocked early on, and provide a good change of pace to some of the events, but still feel uninspired (throw Frisbees through hoops; smack a grey dummy in specific zones). The different areas add some spice to proceedings: we started out throwing our Frisbee through picturesque green pastures and ended up curling it around dimly lit underground chasms. More emphasis on online play and inter-profile competition would have bolstered the package but, as it stands, *Sports Champions* feels lightweight, and slightly hollow for a full-priced title.

Technically, *Sports Champions* beats *Wii Sports* and its trendier brother, *Wii Sports Resort*, into submission. In reality, however, neither of Wii's peripheral-sellers are concerned with the 1:1 control, sub-pixel accuracy and HD graphics boasted by PS Move. Do enough people care that Wii Tennis's tracking is a bit off, or that your gran can ignore the tutorial before scoring three strikes in a row? No doubt the sales charts will provide an answer.

Of the six options on offer here, you'll probably try Gladiator Duel first. And you'll be right to – it's a sword-fighting simulation with some finesse, combining the thrills of clouting an opponent in the face with the opportunity for tactical play. (Unless she's practised, your gran is due a battering.) Hold T to move your shield arm and use the motion controller's face buttons to out-manoeuvre your opponent. Hit a stalemate? Use a shield bash to force an opening. Opponent swinging wildly? Block each hit to fill your super strike meter, then make them pay for their scattershot naïvety with a satisfying, though canned, special move. It's a motion control highlight which, like the majority of *Sports Champions*' events, feels just as good with one or two players.

Then there are the direct responses to *Wii Sports*' biggest hits. Table Tennis is less consistent, but shows off the technology just as well. After a few games, smashes and slices become instinct, even if success relies on your choice of counter, not reaction time and dexterity. The PS Eye is also used to its fullest here, picking up switches in body position and steps away from the screen to regain control after an opponent's smash.

Disc Golf is one of the simplest and prettiest events on offer, at least until your disc goes off-course, and things get grubbier, revealing rough edges to the geometry. The same can be said of Beach Volleyball, though you don't need to play badly before things get glitchy (do anything other than a textbook shot, in fact, and your avatar's wrists painfully contort to compensate). Archery is one of the few events that genuinely benefits from two motion controllers, and though later minigames add variation in play that take advantage of the satisfying physics model, it's hard to get excited about aiming at a target and releasing a trigger, even if it is a bit windy. Then there's Bocce, which proves that, no matter how well emulated, taking turns to toss a ball at another ball is not an activity suited to showcasing the potential thrill factor promised by Sony's hardware.

Sports Champions rests in a limbo between simulation, tech demo and party game, the characters sitting between cultural stereotype, Home avatar and *Athlete Kings* caricature, folding their arms and winking at the camera or chuckling smugly before performing. It remains an early PS Move highlight, but one that can't boast the charm or accessibility of its Wii rivals, despite the improved tech. For that reason, it may struggle to find an audience beyond PS Move's wave of early adopters. **[6]**



Yes, it's running in a suitably high resolution and features some decent lighting effects, but look beyond the sheen and the visuals feel somewhat characterless, more in tune with PS Home than Nintendo's cuddly Wii environment

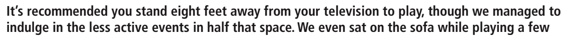




The lack of an avatar creation tool, along with the bland stereotypes, dates the game severely. The same can be said about the sparse menus and cold orchestral score







It's recommended you stand eight feet away from your television to play, though we managed to indulge in the less active events in half that space. We even sat on the sofa while playing a few





The game is shot through with minor annoyances, from the finickiness of unit selection to the way dialogue boxes interrupt you as though in competition. Concede to one pop-up nagging you to look at the spell book, and before you get to the next screen, another unrelated box will intercept

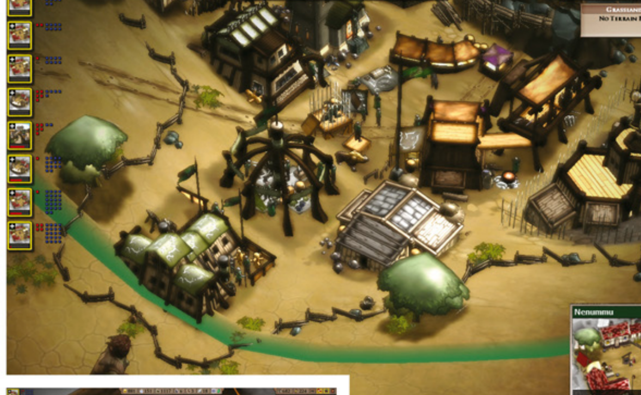


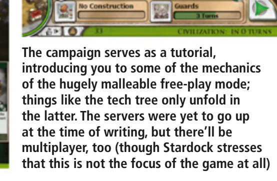
The tactical battle system is the weakest of the game's components, and yet it's dangerous to resolve battles automatically: the computer doesn't use ranged attacks effectively, and often prefers to throw your precious but puny magic-using monarch into bouts of hand-to-hand



ELEMENTAL: WAR OF MAGIC

FORMAT: PC **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: STARDOCK **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE





The campaign serves as a tutorial, introducing you to some of the mechanics of the hugely malleable free-play mode; things like the tech tree only unfold in the latter. The servers were yet to go up at the time of writing, but there'll be multiplayer, too (though Stardock stresses that this is not the focus of the game at all)

Like *Galactic Civilizations 2*, Stardock's previous sprawling strategy title, *Elemental: War Of Magic* is a game of considerable scale and ambition, gobbling up *Civilization* whole and washing it down with a gulp of RPG. You build cities, forge empires, make alliances, break alliances and marry your children off to secure your dynasty, ultimately achieving victory through one of several technological, diplomatic or martial paths. Along the way, you'll craft your monarch into a mighty magic user, a bulwark of the turn-based tactical battlefield, standing alongside intricately composed forces to mop up the unearthly evils spilled into your kingdom by unwitting adventurers.

Almost inevitably, the game creaks under the weight of its own ambition. Stardock has been in a patching frenzy following release, and the game is now stable, at least on our test rigs. But even putting performance aside, there exists such a number of low-level bugs, intermixed with the oddities of *Elemental*'s opaque and unrefined design, that it's hard to put a timescale on when a version will emerge that does justice to Stardock's ideas.

We'll wait, all the same. *Elemental* joins *Stalker*, *ArmA* and *Demigod* in that rare category of games whose release issues can be borne on the promise of eventual transcendence, its flaws buffed away, if not by the development team, then by the comprehensive inbuilt modding toolset. And even if you write off the game's potential altogether, what exists now is still capable of enthralling. Few games manage to describe the effects of magic at a strategic level; here, wizardry is as essential to empire management as fireballs and lightning attacks are on the battlefield (see 'Learning to spell').

But *Elemental* is often utterly confounding. Because the game obscures much of its underpinning calculations (or simply assumes your familiarity with the exchange of stats involved), it's hard to know if you've been scuppered by a bug or your ignorance of some unseen modifier. A battle occurs in which neither opponent can actually hit each other at all. Later, we auto-resolve a massive melee clash, only for the game to decide our victory as though we were fighting a single enemy unit. Some buffs seem not to work – have we failed to research some unknown branch of the tech tree, or is this a malfunction?

The interface, meanwhile, needlessly duplicates some information while burying other vital menus beneath inconspicuous symbols. A character's inventory is listed in several places, and yet it's different in every location. So it is with nearly every interface in the game, cryptic and awkward in execution, from the unknown depths of the tech tree to the unintuitive classification of spells. Acclimatise yourself to the game's eccentricities, however, and there is elegance to be found. The interplay between your monarch's progression as a character and empire-level strategy is smart: being your only magic user for much of the game, he's an essential part of your army, and choosing how you divide his attention while fighting on several fronts is key. More aggressive AIs will exploit this, drawing your monarch's army out, then cutting it off from the rest – and, as the game progresses, you learn neat magical rebuttals to such manoeuvres.

The subtlety of these exchanges suggests that a strategy game of some greatness exists beneath the cumbersome framework, and we trust Stardock, a developer of proven diligence and passion, to continue refining it. But, even without the bugs, making *Elemental*'s systems transparent will be an epic quest indeed – and, for the player, it means a battle fought as much on FAQs as on the field. **[6]**



Although you can trade items between units, only hero characters can actually equip the items you give them. If you want to upgrade another unit's bow, you'll have to build a new unit from scratch – but the flipside is that there are huge customisation options for each unit

Learning to spell



As the name of the game suggests, though many of your units will wield swords, it's sorcery that turns the tide of battle. Not only is it useful as artillery in the tactical combat itself, but in order to keep a grip on the corners of your empire you'll have to channel casting abilities into other hero units, or teleport your monarch across the world. And though this is likely to be rebalanced, summoning fire giants is currently a far more cost-effective solution to bolstering the front line than recruiting soldiers from city populations.



LAST WINDOW: THE SECRET OF CAPE WEST

FORMAT: DS **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO **DEVELOPER:** CING



Did Cing know it wasn't long for this world when making *Last Window*? The sequel to *Hotel Dusk* is triggered by an eviction notice – the eponymous building is coming down and threatens to take one last unsolved mystery with it. Wandering through the packing crates as the cast shrinks all around, you have to ask just who is getting one last shot here: gruff investigator Kyle Hyde or the creators themselves?

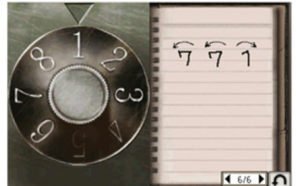
Prescient stuff. Familiar, too. Where Hyde accepts his approaching fate as an excuse to pry where he never dared before, Cing remains rooted in its comfort zone. This is the same blend of talky exposition and touchscreen minigames that singled out Cing as one to watch with 2005's *Another Code*; the same blend it has failed to develop beyond since. The delivery is smoother. *Dusk*'s brutally sudden game overs are softened with checkpoints, and clearer signposting prevents aimless pixel tapping. If only the puzzles had received a similar polish. Endless interactions with doorknobs and answering machines hardly set the pulse racing.

However, if Cing champions interactive fiction to the bitter end, it is not to a bitter end. Where so many videogame yarns choose to wallow in miserable finality, Cing's is a typically offbeat vision of camaraderie at the end of an era. Hyde's case regularly steps aside for character observation – the lovelorn neighbours spurred into action by the deadline, or the waitress trying to give her customers a fitting send-off meal. For all *Last Window*'s interactive limitations, it remains a subtle study of a parting of ways. Fans of Cing's previous work could ask for no more apt a swansong. **[7]**



Hyde's new interrogation system mimics Phoenix Wright's. Push on the wrong point and suspects will storm off, taking their secrets with them



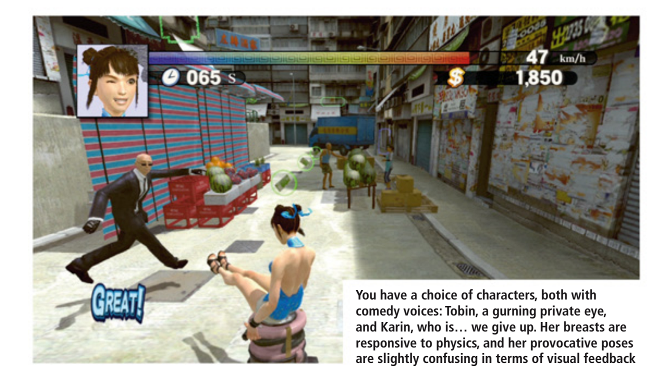


Hyde remains a refreshingly grumpy DS hero, rolling his eyes at idiot flatmates, obnoxious infomercials and everything in between



KUNG FU RIDER

FORMAT: PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** SCE
DEVELOPER: JAPAN STUDIO **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E218



You have a choice of characters, both with comedy voices: Tobin, a gurning private eye, and Karin, who is… we give up. Her breasts are responsive to physics, and her provocative poses are slightly confusing in terms of visual feedback

What is the purpose of motion control? Is it to narrow the gap between interaction and action – to make control a matter of intuition rather than the rote learning made necessary by arbitrary key binding? You wouldn't know it from *Kung Fu Rider*, a Move-powered score-attack obstacle course which demands so much of Sony's waggle-wand that the PlayStation Eye camera becomes muddled by the variety of gestures.

The concept is a joyously silly one, and executed with the rich colours and vibrancy of a Dreamcast-era Sega classic. You must negotiate the streets of Hong Kong, perched on the seat of an office chair as it rattles down hills, beneath barricades and over ramps, collecting money as you go. There are many hazards which threaten to send you flying: careless workmen carry ladders across roadways, cars pull out of junctions abruptly, and local mobsters wielding staffs lay in wait. Threats are often unforeseen, not least because your character frequently obscures the screen's centre, but also because they are simply designed to be unforeseeable, with cars lurching from off-camera, sometimes from behind you, to smash you from your seat.

Even though the physics are relatively forgiving given the number of objects you plough through, your control is still continuously disrupted as kerbs, corners and cones snag your wheels. Come off your chair and you are reset, many times facing entirely the wrong direction, without any visible signage to suggest where the end goal lies. Frustration can't entirely blamed on inexpert handling: the Move tech itself undermines mastery, misinterpreting jumps as speed boosts, and vice versa, at critical moments.

Even if calibrated to perfection, the game makes no argument for Move hardware as an ideal means of control. All the interaction it requires could be better executed, with equal intuition and far greater reliability, on a joypad with an analogue stick. The chirpy attitude and offbeat concept make a case for this as an enjoyable frivolity, and po-faced issues recede in the face of its willful absurdity, but even casual players will eventually find the wheels come off. **[4]**



The PS Eye takes snapshots of you that can be viewed at the end of each level. Resentful grimaces quickly segue into blank stares of resignation





START THE PARTY

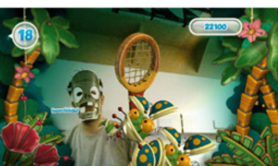
FORMAT: PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** SCE
DEVELOPER: SUPER MASSIVE GAMES **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E218



As shindigs go, *Start The Party* is a curiously muted affair. The balloons have been blown up, the bunting hung and glasses primed, but the guests, it seems, are afraid to mix. Each of the nine minigames ably demonstrates PS Move's qualities, but they do so in isolation. It avoids repetition but sacrifices depth.

Games range from painting shapes, to cutting hair, to saving plastic people from a Plasticine dinosaur. Most of them function brilliantly. Displaying the player's image onscreen doesn't negatively impact on the fidelity of the Move experience, and motions are reproduced perfectly. Whether swatting bugs or delicately steering an aircraft, the player rarely feels less than completely in control. Only a lightweight bubble-bursting game fails to stand up, and even then it's more to do with the cluttered presentation style than the motion controller's inability to sense depth.

All good clean fun, then, but it's not really anything we haven't seen before. Only the ghost-hunting game dares push things beyond the boundaries of Wii country, by asking players to cover the motion controller's glowing orb in order to hide from a particularly resilient spirit.

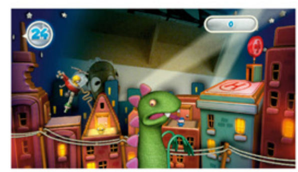


The quickfire round takes a cue from *WarioWare*, but despite the cheerful art direction it lacks the off-the-wall sense of humour of Nintendo's series

Good as they are, though, the games are limited by a lack of sophistication that isn't quite forgivable even in a game so squarely aimed at kids and casual players. Combining the motions found in separate games might have helped, but a quickfire mode that attempts to do just that by shunting microgames together just leaves the already flimsy motion-based activities feeling even more throwaway.

It doesn't help that local multiplayer is thrown over in favour of a hotseat-style system in which players pass one controller between them. A thoughtful concession to budget-conscious parents? Perhaps, but it muffles the genuine sense of competition on which other such games thrive. Only the occasional ability to deface your opponent's avatar is left to pick up the slack.

Not so much a party as a warm-up event, then. But it's one that ably demonstrates that all the building blocks are present to craft a fully fledged minigame compilation to rival, or perhaps surpass, anything in Nintendo's Wii back catalogue. **[5]**



The rescue mission game is made enjoyably tense by the inexplicably frightening Godzilla-alike, but the controls are limited to twists of the wand



WII PARTY

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** OCTOBER 8
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO **DEVELOPER:** ND CUBE

"This game is entirely down to luck." As far as instructional openings go, the first minigame we encounter in *Wii Party* does not instil much hope. Factor in a migration of *Mario Party* talent to Nd Cube – bringing along the boardgame format – and *Wii Party* threatens to stumble into the classic *Party* pitfall: the skill of minigame play undermined by the fortuitousness of the dice. Indeed, the two central boardgame modes – a jungle and a globe-trotting quest littered with twists sure to annoy – feel like leftovers from some abandoned *Mario Party 9*.

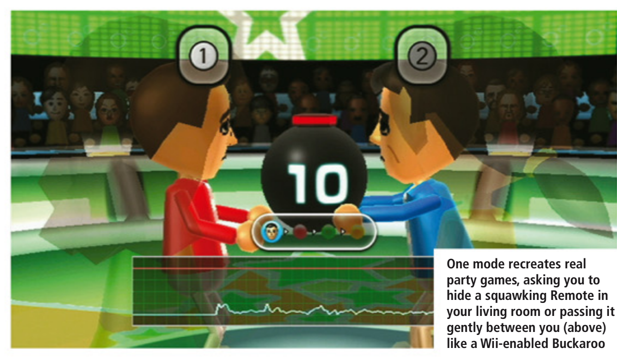
The games themselves are mixed. Some are great; some grate. The best put players in direct confrontation, trying to knock each other with swingballs or punch rivals from behind in a brilliantly literal take on backstabbing. Games that challenge players to race are less successful; without malicious player interaction, the tasks become easy and repetitive. To their credit, the 80 offerings exploit all of the Wii Remote's functionality (with a packaged Remote it's a fine replacement for *Wii Play*), and do so with typical Nintendo accuracy. Not something that could be said of Wii's *Mario Party 8*.

So why hinder our access so? Riffs on bingo, Wheel Of Fortune and matching pairs suffer from sluggish ceremony and sparseness of minigames. Waiting too long for too little contradicts the madcap energy of the games. Instead, parties of four must look to *Wii Party*'s least glamorous mode for fun, delving into the minigame bank for a best-of-five. This instant access makes for fun ten-minute blasts, so why is the option buried deep in a submenu?

Only Balance Boat truly engages. Two players sit Miis on a swaying pirate ship, with cooperative minigame success deciding the size differential of the passengers. Marrying silly hands-on minigames with a silly hands-on task, it is a pure flash of fun in a largely muddled package. **[5]**



Miis at least make better guests than Mario and gang, allowing for surreal (and inevitable) mash-ups of friends, celebrities and notorious dictators

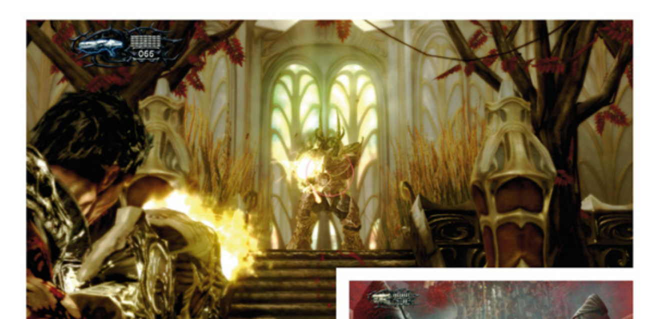


One mode recreates real party games, asking you to hide a squawking Remote in your living room or passing it gently between you (above) like a Wii-enabled Buckaroo



QUANTUM THEORY

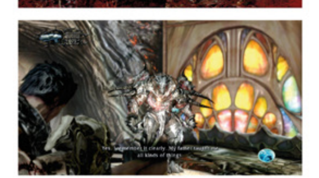
FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: TECMO KOEI DEVELOPER: TEAM TACHYON
PREVIOUSLY IN: E211



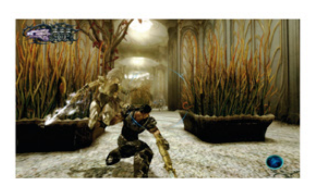
If quality issues were the reason for *Quantum Theory*'s six-month slip, the review code paints a wretched picture of the state it must have been in earlier this year. So limp is this game's final form that it took a minor office debate before everyone was convinced that this was indeed review code at all.

Quantum Theory's developers looked to the west when making the game, and they crib from *Gears Of War* relentlessly, down to mimicking the gruff quips issued by the game's charmless fat-necked protagonist when picking up ammunition. But Team Tachyon hasn't plundered more than trivialities; beyond that familiar veneer of macho bombast, it shows no understanding of *Gears*' winning qualities. There is cover, and there is shooting, but that's about as far as its tribute goes. It disregards *Gears*' variation – the opportunity to juggle guns, chainsaws and grenades to imprint the player's will upon any given combat scenario. Even the basic details are wanting – weaponry splashes enemies with wet, feeble blasts, providing little feedback before the model instantly vanishes, replaced with a blurry splatter texture. Visually, the game as a whole veers between notably poor and baseline adequacy.

It has some ideas of its own, but these do not conceal its drab fundamentals. Civilisation has been all but destroyed by Arks – huge, living towers originally built as utopian dwellings, but whose immune systems have turned upon humanity. The mysterious protagonist, improbably named Syd, is committed to bringing them down, working his way to the top with the help of nubile female allies who are in some way linked to the towers. But the concept of living architecture is a cursory intrigue in a game whose banal mechanics are maligned by vile boss battles, erratic checkpointing, difficulty spikes and cheap instant deaths born of incoherent design. You can lament games that try and fail, but *Quantum Theory*'s only intent is duplication, and the result is void of imagination and raw in execution. Unlike its namesake, *Quantum Theory* makes no attempt to depart from classical mechanics – it merely diminishes them. **[3]**



The game may be powered by Unreal Engine 3, but textures are bleary and level geometry basic, while the character models err on the side of ludicrous, their faces falling somewhere between incompetent photofit and Mr Potato Head



Syd is joined by various allies. In the bland, grey cityscapes, a human resistance force stands around firing weapons ineffectually



DODONPACHI RESURRECTION

FORMAT: IPHONE RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: CAVE DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE





Converting the original arcade title is an achievement in itself, and it all holds up thanks to a practical control scheme

Is "Touch Screen" the new "Insert Coin"? Cave certainly thinks so. Hot on the heels of iPhone debut *Espgaluda II*, *Dodonpachi Resurrection* is the next step in a '90s bullet-hell revival. Increasing the onscreen action and stretching the hardware considerably (anything below 3GS need not apply), *Resurrection* is proof that the most hardcore of genres is a perfect fit for the most accessible of platforms.

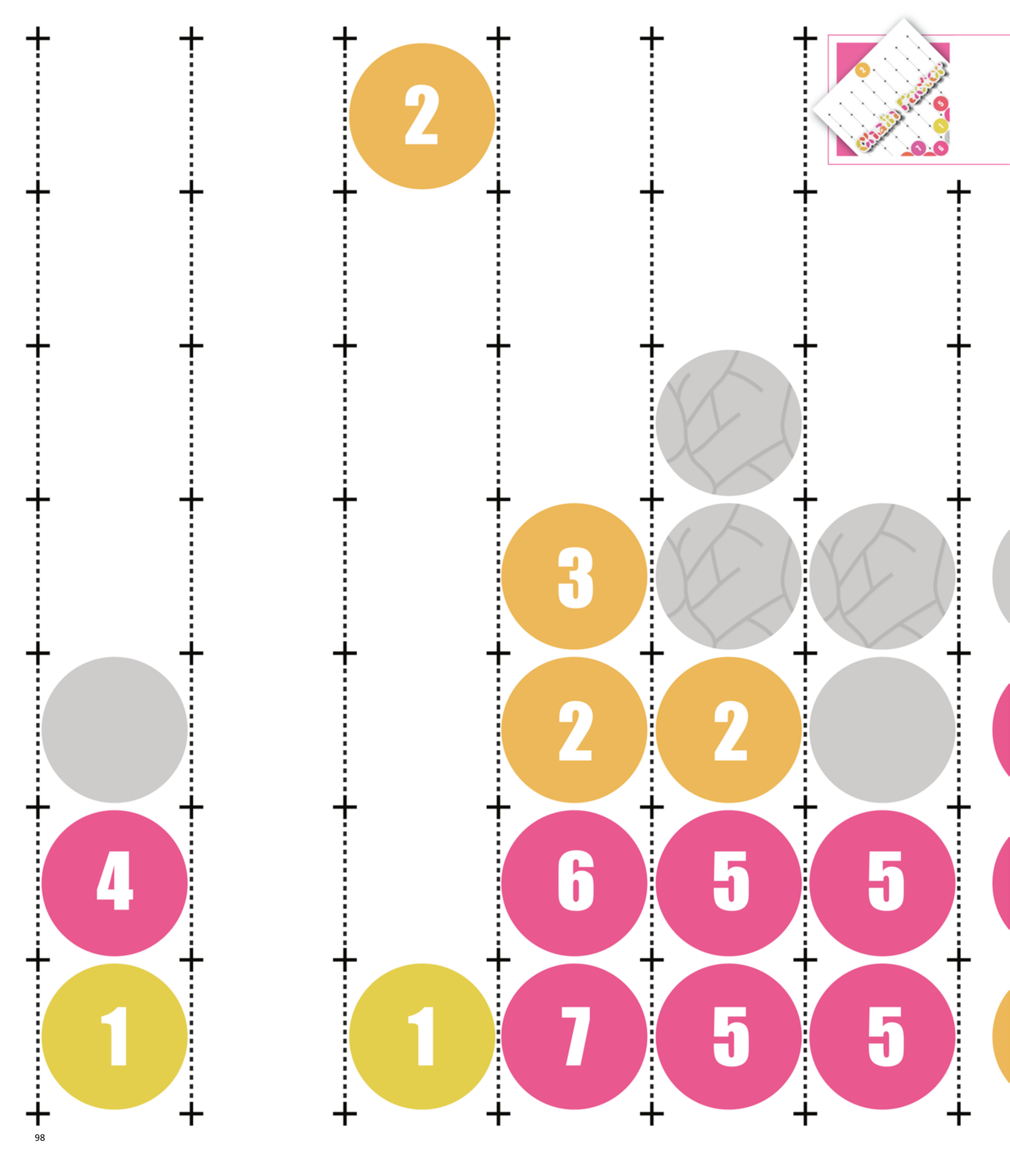
An iPhone in portrait mode is perfect for this style of vertically scrolling action, Cave's detailed sprites and countless projectiles always a threat but never impossible to navigate as they rain down on your ship. Manoeuvring out of harm's way and managing your inventory (bombs can be used as a shield if the odds are against you) is your task, and while iPhone Mode keeps things simple with three ships, the original arcade scenario (three ship types, three weapon styles) offers the most depth and variables. There's a mode for varying moods, then, and it opens the floodgates of a genre previously limited by its lack of accessibility and localised conversions.

Problems are few. The Type-C ship's cannon fire can be indistinguishable from enemy bullets of the same colour, and the shifting framerate can disorient. Such issues are cancelled out by Cave's new additions, the Slaughter and Menace systems (which reward decimation or dodging respectively) and the Hyper Cannon (which turns the tables when you need it) adding layers of strategy to the firefights.

An initial playthrough can be over in under half an hour, but that's just the beginning: high scores are your real pursuit. At its core, this is a game of pattern recognition at 1,000 lasers per second, comparable only to the adrenal excitement of *Geometry Wars* or *Bangai-O*. For a multi-tiered slice of repetitive brain injury on your phone, there's nothing more immediate and engaging than *Dodonpachi*'s resurrection. **[8]**



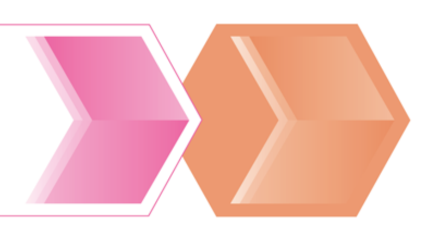
The Hyper Cannon, when used in a particular fire mode, can be aimed with the sweep of a finger

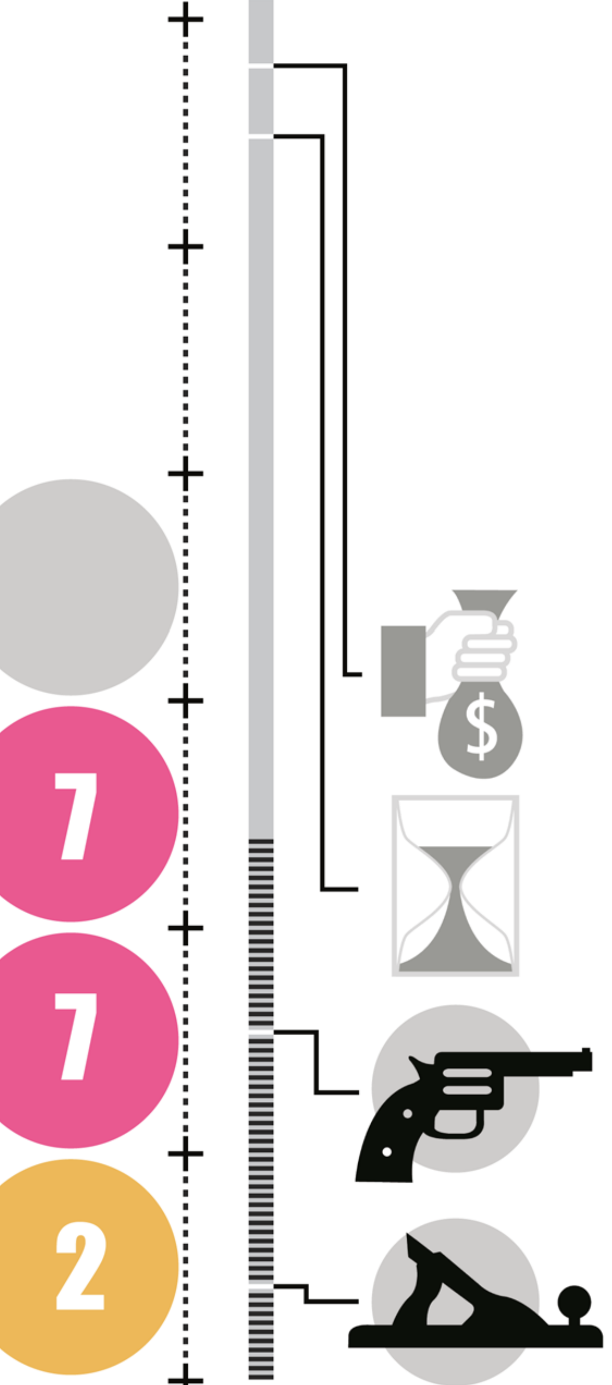

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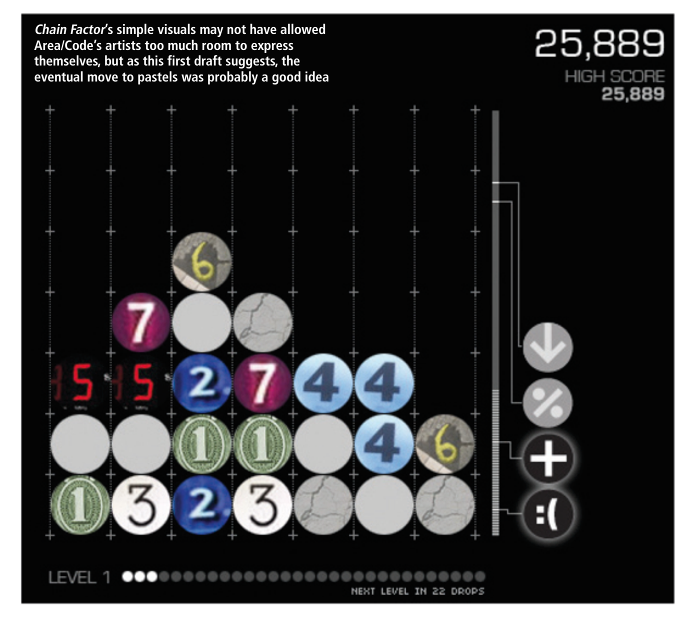
TIME EXTEND

CHAIN FACTOR

FORMAT: **BROWSER**
PUBLISHER: **AREA/CODE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2007**







Chain Factor's simple visuals may not have allowed Area/Code's artists too much room to express themselves, but as this first draft suggests, the eventual move to pastels was probably a good idea

Awkward to describe and tricky to pin down, Chain Factor's unlikely powers of narrative will pull you in all the same

The biggest hurdle any puzzle game has to get past tends to come at the very start of the journey – with its own instructions. While a majority of players can generally prod their way hesitantly through the first hectic minutes of almost any shooter, RPG or sports sim, puzzle games often exist in a sterile, directionless world of rarefied abstraction – a world of baffling multipliers and unexpected end-states. Even the most basic coloured-block matcher requires a carefully calibrated tutorial to get players moving, while the more complex among them hinge on notions sufficiently theoretical to require lengthy FAQs to explain themselves adequately. *Tetris*, the most natural puzzle game ever made, is the glorious, smirking exception, of course – it greets players with vistas of incompleteness that trigger a response so hardwired into animal brains that it's somewhat staggering cats and dogs haven't started playing it yet. But, for the most part, puzzlers make a poor first impression: they are founded on pedantic variation, built on pure ideas – and ideas often need a few minutes to properly take hold.

Chain Factor has it even worse than most of them. Area/Code's polite pastel-coloured brain-twister has the audacity to throw numbers into the mix as well as shapes. Beyond that, its homepage is littered with dense patches of text, composed of various intimidating high-score tables and muddlesome references to the crossmedia sprawl of fiction that spawned the whole thing. Most damningly of all, if you're playing *Drop7* – the newer mobile version of the game – the instructions throw difficult words like 'contiguous' around with glib abandon. Has the developer gone out of its way to create a willfully niche product?

In truth, there's nothing niche about *Chain Factor* whatsoever. It may take a little longer to get your head around than a *Puyo Pop* or a *Panel De Pon*, but this free browser game is still one of the purest and most potent puzzlers ever made: a bubbling brew of numerical and

OUT OF SEQUENCE

Chain Factor's life-destroying *Drop7* incarnation saw it landing on mobile devices with the Power elements of the web game removed – but a duo of new variants more than made up for that. While Hardcore, with its fearsomely quick waves, remains the best way to experience Area/Code's game in its true brutality, Sequence is a fascinating entity in its own right. The closest *Drop7* gets to a campaign mode, Sequence sees you facing off against the same arrangement of discs each time you play, taking an experience that hinges on ingenuity and luck and transforming it into a feat of memory and point optimisation. With every player around the world tackling the exact same challenge, the global leaderboard has become a frantic battleground.



It's a measure of *Chain Factor*'s strength as a game that it survived the conclusion of the ARG. With over one million games played to date, the community around the website is still thriving

spatial logic driven home with a daring and dangerous twist of straight-up idiotic luck. The most common comparisons are to *Lumines* and Sudoku – both of which put you in the right kind of mood, with neither genuinely capturing the game's peculiar flair and idiosyncrasy – but, in truth, *Chain Factor* is as irritating to try to classify as it is to attempt to describe.

The right disc will mean that you'll be able to bring them all down in a splendid staggering shower of points, before things take a disastrous turn

And all of that begs an obvious question: how could something so complex, so intricate, so niggling, turn out to be so intoxicating at the same time?

It all started with Numb3rs, a stoically unremarkable CBS mystery show about an FBI agent who likes to solve crimes with the aid of his maths genius brother. In 2007, CBS commissioned an alternate reality game (ARG) to promote the series, and a dense crossplatform web was stitched together – a web that would eventually tangle up billboards, mobile phone messages and sneaky clues hidden on internet banners and TV adverts. At the centre of all this 21st century branding busywork was a character named Spectre, who was a game designer gone bad – and at the centre of Spectre's story was a casual game called *Chain Factor*.

Tricky stuff. To suit the pitch, Area/Code had to create an experience that was simple enough to get players involved, but also sufficiently deep to keep them plugging away at it in their thousands for a number of weeks, as clues to the unfolding ARG continued to spill out in the form of fake error messages and snatches of code. Described as '*Tetris*-like' by the Wall Street Journal – the first of many not-quite-right classifications – the resulting game sees players dropping numbered discs into a 7x7 grid. When the number on the disc matches the size of the row or column it sits in, it disappears, scoring points, and steadily cracking any blank-faced grey discs that touch it, eventually revealing the numbers within. Generate chains, where one disappearing disc triggers another, and a simple multiplier kicks in. Meanwhile, after a certain number of drops, a fresh row of grey discs appears at the bottom of the screen, bumping everything closer to the top of the grid, ultimately ending the game.

While the ARG presented a game that was an experiment in 'collaborative problem solving', offering the promise of narrative closure and a range of different power modes for players that unlocked them, in reality the puzzler Area/Code had created was complex enough to keep players clicking away all by itself. There's an engrossing tidal rhythm to learning the intricacies of *Chain Factor* – an ebb and flow that sees you first baffled, then confident you've unravelled all its secrets, and then baffled once again as the more obscure implications of the game's handful of simple systems finally emerge.

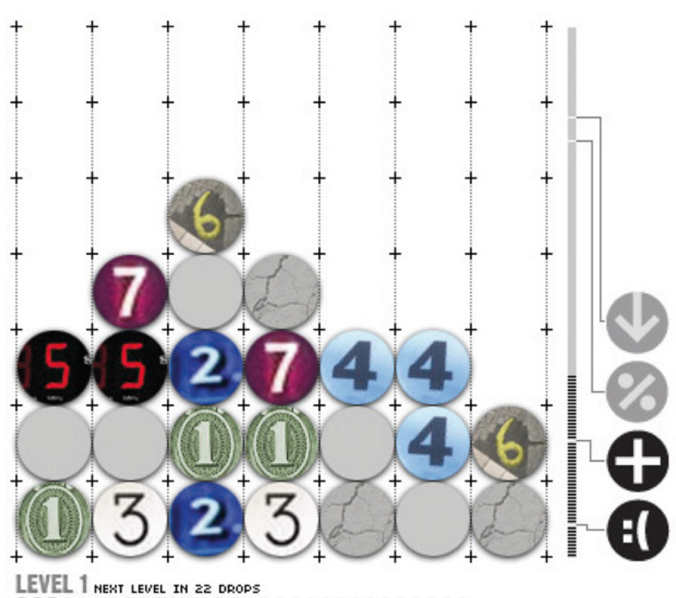
The key to understanding the crux of *Chain Factor*'s devious nature comes fairly early on, however, as, having mastered the most basic matter of clearing discs from the play area, you realise that the game is handing out points rather reluctantly. To get the really high scores and to make any kind of impact on the







Advertising for the ARG spread from Manhattan subway stations to CBS websites. Casually subversive, the ads tend to blend into the background, making them even more of a chore for the game's players to hunt down. Thousands still did, however, extending the life of an hour-long TV plot into a crossmedia event that lasted for over six weeks



The smart player gets rid of the low numbers as quickly as possible. Highs come in increasingly useful as the towers get taller, but the last thing you want is a crust of 1s and 2s between you and the grey discs

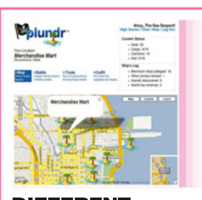
leaderboards at all, you'll need to orchestrate chains to the get the multiplier going – and that pushes you towards filling the screen with rich stacks of discs. It's a risky strategy and one that sees you constructing a series of numerical skyscrapers, rising perilously close to the top of the playing area, in the hope that the arrival of the right disc will mean that you'll be able to bring them all down in a splendid staggering shower of points, before things take a disastrous turn.

It's here that *Chain Factor* works its unlikeliest magic, and that's because so many of Area/Code's rivals in the casual space have fallen into the habit of constructing puzzle games that exist in a kind of unending loop of play. In *Bejewelled*, say, your thousandth move in the game is likely to be fairly similar to your fifth: your score will have gone up, but your circumstances remain unchanged – the board is still filled with a pattern of jewels that is always shifting, but always essentially constant. You're stuck in ludic limbo, and there's no real context – no real landmarks – to allow you to get your bearings. Sure, such games often throw combo systems into the mix to provide players with more of a sense of progress, but existing at a level that's removed from the core mechanics, they tend to be inherently artificial.

Chain Factor, however – like *Tetris* – is built on its combo system: it's the spinning gear that turns at the heart of its machinery. In *Tetris* it's the combo that's ceaselessly pushing you towards holding off for the showboating four-row clearance, and in *Chain Factor* it's forever tempting you into building those teetering towers of discs a little higher when you should really be keeping them as low as possible. It's a combo system, in other words, that is fixated on undoing you; it's a combo system that gives each round its own plot.

As a game built from a flailing strand of TV narrative, it's oddly satisfying to discover that *Chain Factor*'s tempting network of score multipliers has allowed it to tell a story in its own way, then. And the story it tells, more often than not, turns out to be a swift reinvention of the Icarus myth – a tale of hope taken too far, of ambition and ingenuity fighting for balance. You pile up the discs because you think you'll have time to bring them all down in time. You reach for the stars because you're greedy for the bigger rewards. And coaxing you towards the truly foolhardy behaviour, of course, is that tiny sliver of pure luck that all the best puzzle games manage to incorporate. There's the randomised drop of the pieces, certainly, but there's also those grey discs already lurking on screen, waiting to be cracked open – the true wildcards, which might trigger a massive avalanche of points at the moment you need it the most, or might bring your game to an abrupt conclusion as the ground shifts and your useless constructions drive themselves into the ceiling.

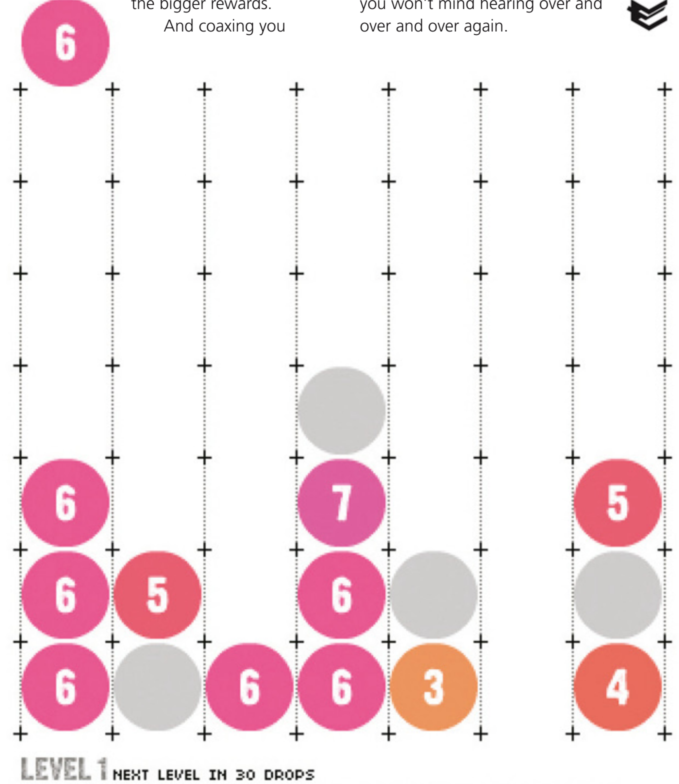
Chain Factor isn't really about Numb3rs, then – and it isn't really about numbers, either. There's plenty of maths lurking in there, of course, but there's so much more besides. Blending architecture and game mechanics together, Area/Code's casual masterpiece is a strange breed of playful fable: a gentle piece of tragic mythology that – chances are – you won't mind hearing over and over and over again.



DIFFERENT AREA/CODES

New York-based Area/Code has set itself the objective of creating "games that spill out over the edges of our screens and devices to blend with the real world in new and surprising ways". While *Drop7*'s assault on Android and iOS platforms has made it the developer's most recognised product, the studio also has a wealth of experience working with Facebook, web and GPS networks. Notable works from its back catalogue include *Plundr* (below), a location-based pirate adventure for the PC that wouldn't be out of place in William Gibson's Bigend Trilogy, and the road-crossing MMORPG *Code Of Everand* – a game commissioned by the UK department of transport to teach children about road safety.









THE MAKING OF...
BOULDER DASH

How a lone first-time developer happened across a gameplay formula that just kept on delivering...

FORMAT: **VARIOUS** PUBLISHER: **FIRST STAR SOFTWARE** DEVELOPER: **PETER LIEPA** ORIGIN: **CANADA** RELEASE: **1984**

Generally speaking, there's not much room in today's mainstream game industry for freewheeling, doodling or, heaven forbid, 'making it up as you go along'. Budgets are tight, stakes are high and teams are huge – a successful game today is planned and scheduled to the last detail, from concept to completion. It's refreshing to hear, then, that a key touchstone for a generation of gamers started life as little more than a mathematical exercise that snowballed gloriously out of control.

Like so many early C64, Atari 400/800 and ZX Spectrum classics, *Boulder Dash* was an accidental phenomenon, the fruit of a single curious number-cruncher trying his hand at game design for the very first time and hitting upon a genius formula. Typical of the DIY bedroom coding boom of the early '80s, Canadian **Peter Liepa** was young, self-taught, and a card-carrying maths geek. His first love wasn't gaming itself, but code.

"During high school, those of us who were interested were allowed to spend a week at the National Research Council of Canada," recalls Liepa of his introduction to the world of programming. "We were taken on a tour of the computer centre there, and basically I didn't leave. That night I wrote out my first program on paper and entered it on an interactive terminal the next day. Right after grad school I fell into writing business applications, in various permutations of employment, freelancing and partnerships. One day, after playing videogames on a friend's console, I had an 'I can do that' realisation and went out and bought an Atari 800."

Following that lightbulb moment, Liepa seized the initiative and called a local software publisher to ask what sort of thing they were looking for. As it turned out, they had a concept for a clone of an arcade game called *The Pit* – a *Dig Dug*-aping escapade in which you had to tunnel through a labyrinth to retrieve a gem. Liepa had a look and came away unimpressed, but something about the mechanic of digging through screens of rubble lit the touch-paper, and he begun fiddling around with the bare-bones concept that would eventually solidify into *Boulder Dash*.

"I would fill the screen with random combinations of rocks and dirt," he recounts, "and found that digging through combinations of rocks and dirt was both tricky and a lot of fun." However, he needed a good reason to be burrowing through all of this virtual dirt. In what was quickly becoming classic videogame tradition, he dotted jewels around his primitive caverns, and then added tension in the form of lethal insects.

"I was very fond of using random number generators to do the detailed work of laying out caves. In other words, rocks, dirt, air, jewels and sometimes walls, butterflies and fireflies were placed randomly. The only thing I would do is tune the densities. I would overlay these layouts with deterministic elements that contributed to the theme of the cave – walls, flies, amoeba, etc.

"There was no formula for the design – it was just like jamming on a musical instrument, and the possibilities seemed endless"

"Often the caves were inspired by these layouts, or some theme that I discovered while playing with random arrangements. Usually a theme would single out things that you faced in random gameplay. You'd take a theme like chasing, evading or destroying fireflies and butterflies, and make it a main element of a cave. Or a theme would involve amping up the various elements like rocks and jewels. There was no formula for this – it was just like jamming on a musical instrument, and the possibilities seemed endless – not only enough to populate the game and its sequels, but also countless adaptations, both authorised and unauthorised."



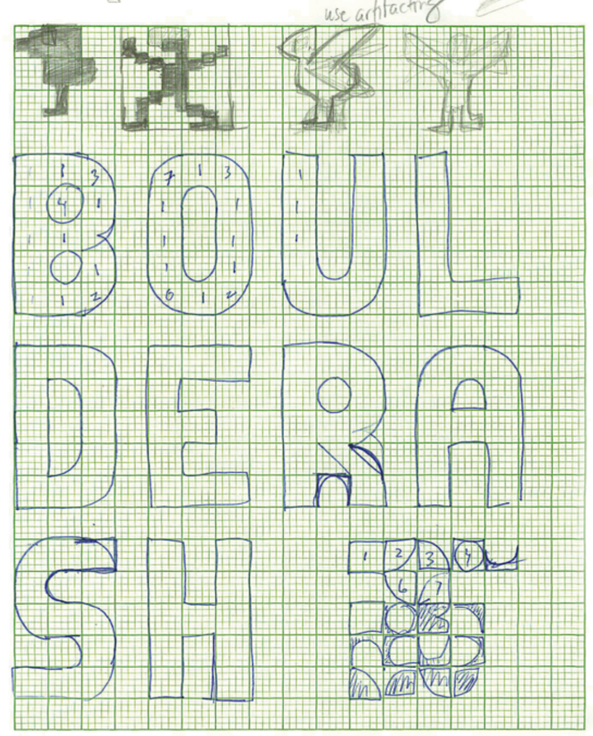
THE CLONE WARS

In the 26 years since its original release, *Boulder Dash* has become one of the most cloned games of all time. Aside from commercially available me-toos like the hugely successful *Repton* and Kingsoft's *Emerald Mine* series, there have been countless fan-made internet-only efforts over the years. *Blobby Dash*, *Boulder Smash*, *Boulder Cash*, *Boulder Dazz*, *Boulderoid*, *Pretzel Dash*, *Rock Run*, *Rock Rush* and *Stone Dash* are but a small selection. Naturally, some are better than others, but a few definitely deserve attention, especially *Rocks 'N' Diamonds*, a 1995 open source freeware effort that now boasts over 50,000 user-generated levels. Visit its official website (www.artsoft.org/rocksndiamonds) for more information.

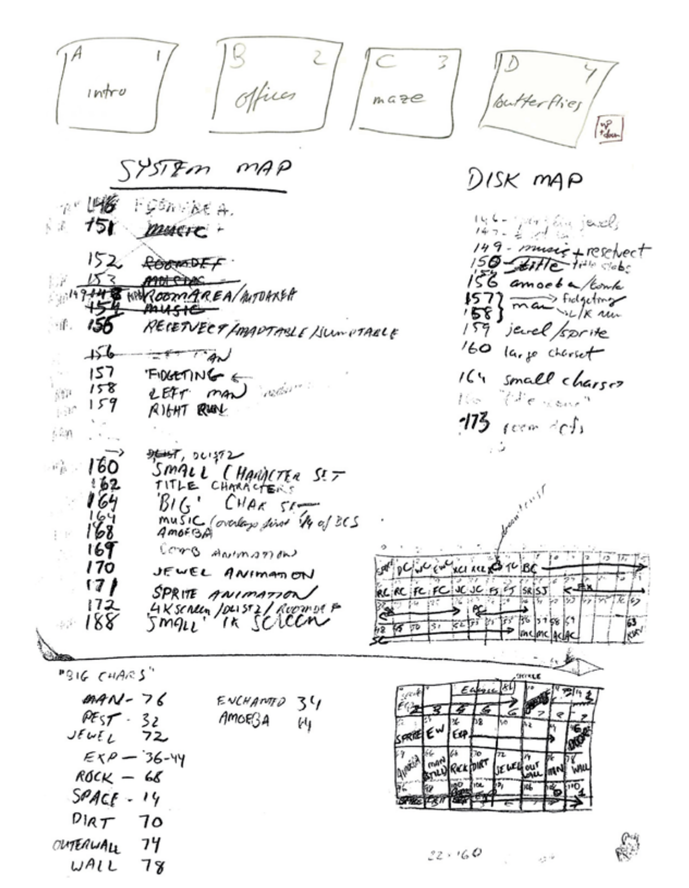


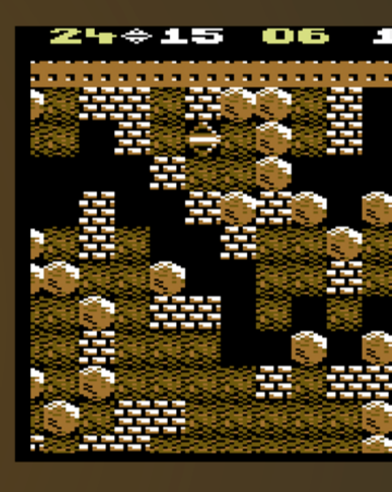


"Hardly any of this [game] was based on a predetermined design or process, insists *Boulder Dash*'s creator Peter Liepa. "There was simply a muddle-through evolution"



Liepa's 'to do' lists (below) are littered with design-related asides such as "should he explode?" and "levels do not seem to be in order of difficulty", providing a window into the creative process



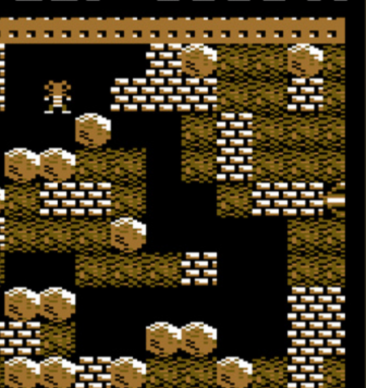


The creator of the original clone, Chris Gray, had some involvement at first and received a credit in the final version of *Boulder Dash*, but the pair went their separate ways early on in development once it became clear that Liepa was marching to his own beat. Not only that, but the publisher Liepa had originally approached also dropped out a few months after he began programming, but not before it'd made a few suggestions. In early builds of the game, Rockford, the game's fidgety hero, was nothing more than a simple stickman completely devoid of personality. Liepa referred to him simply as "the man".

"The original would-be publisher had a look at an early draft and was adamant that the man needed to be a recognisable character," remembers Liepa. "I was originally dismissive of this, but eventually came around and doubled the size of all the elements in the game – rocks, jewels, and the man. This was a large amount of work, especially because I had to implement scrolling, but in the end the game was greatly improved.

"In designing the character and his movements, I stumbled upon the idea of making him blink and tap his feet while idle, which began to breathe more life into him. I didn't really have any models or drawings of what character I wanted; I simply changed pixels in my graphics and animation editor until I got a character that worked. Given the coarse pixels available, his head had to be fairly large just to accommodate his eyes."

Absorbed by his creation, Liepa continued to beaver away despite



Each of the game's maps was based around a single gameplay concept, from the introduction of a new foe to an increased density of rocks

the absence of a publisher to serve as a safety net. The game was built entirely using the stack-based programming language Forth, from the visuals right down to that nagging, insistent soundtrack. Liepa worked slowly, averaging about two hours of coding a day. "You could argue that it was a leisurely pace but it was also my primary activity during that period, so even if I wasn't visibly working on it I was thinking about it."

After six months of tinkering, iterative evolution and trial and error, *Boulder Dash* was finished. Liepa built a brief demo to send around to publishers and it quickly caught the eye of First Star Software. The game was released in 1984 on the Atari 400/800 and was an immediate smash. Ports for the Commodore 64, Apple II, ZX Spectrum and MSX soon followed. Numerous sequels and remakes have since appeared on pretty much every platform imaginable, going right up to *Boulder Dash Rocks!* on DS in 2007 and *Boulder Dash: Pirate's Quest* for Windows last year.

In keeping with the unhurried manner in which he originally made the game, Liepa seems unaffected by the enormous success of his limited foray into the world of videogame production. "Curiously, I was somewhat insulated from the success of the game," he explains. "There were some good royalties for a couple of years, but my life generally wasn't affected socially or professionally."

Boulder Dash wasn't to be a means to an end, but an end in its own right; a self-improvement project carried through to an unexpectedly successful conclusion. Other than *Boulder Dash II*, Liepa has had no real involvement in the game industry since. Following the release of the second game, he returned to his origins – the world of applied mathematics, eventually ending up working in the realm of 3D graphics at Alias.

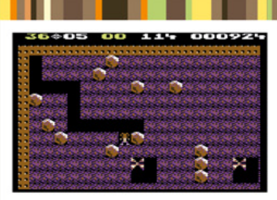
"It's one of those funny things, but I've never been much of a videogame player, and tend to consider myself as unhireable by game companies who want their employees to live and breathe games. On the other hand, I've moved away from the high-end graphics industry recently to get back to some of my other loves, like mathematical visualisation, and to learn more about web technology, which previously I'd been an absolute laggard on. I've got a simple online game project on the back burner – more of a learning project than anything groundbreaking – but you never know, maybe I'll move back into games in a quiet way."

"I remember when a female friend was fascinated at how chomping through dirt appealed to her the way cleaning house did"

Even so, Liepa's clearly very proud of his creation. He keeps an eye on the sequels and countless fan mods circulating the internet ("A mixed bag – sometimes the adaptation misses the boat, sometimes it nails it"), picks up the original from time to time, and is keen to wax lyrical on its enduring appeal.

"I've always thought that *Boulder Dash* is a pretty good game," Liepa humbly insists. "*Boulder Dash* is at heart a deterministic puzzler. You solve the puzzle by collecting enough jewels in a cave to move on to the next cave. Relative to a lot of action games, you don't need a lot of speed, agility or fine motor control. And the elements you need to solve the puzzle are right in front of you. So some of the necessary ingredients to addictiveness – challenge and attainable reward – are there. Attaining the award also tends to involve solving and learning patterns incrementally, which is itself addictive.

"But I think that *Boulder Dash* is also attractive because it appeals to a variety of drives. There are elements of greed, hunting, chasing, fleeing, exploring and destruction that all appeal to primal urges. There is humour in situations where Rockford haplessly gets trapped among boulders, or gets blown up when a boulder falls on him. I remember when a female friend who normally didn't play videogames tried out an early version. She was fascinated at how much chomping through dirt appealed to her the way cleaning house did. Videogames aren't life – in fact, they are more about multiple lives – but the fact remains that they need to hit emotional triggers in order to be successful. Without that, they would merely be cognitive and motor challenges. I was always pleased to hear that *Boulder Dash* appealed to old and young, male and female."



LEARNING THE HARD WAY

In the days before the internet, teaching yourself to program games could be a considerable challenge, as Liepa recalls: "Software development is full of obstacles, some imposed by the technology, some by yourself, and some by the fact that if you're not finding and conquering obstacles you're not really maximising your potential."

Picking up the basic architecture of Atari audio and graphics was his biggest obstacle: "There was no API, just a bunch of hardware locations and ports that do various things. The preferred method of learning stuff was to either read the manual or read tutorials in Byte magazine."

Then there was the delicate issue of debugging: "There was no such thing as a debugger. And in some cases the program execution was driven by hardware interrupts. Surprisingly, writing code that fit into 4K – or was it 8K? – wasn't such a big deal. That's a lot of assembler instructions!"



Rockford was originally a tiny stickman, but Liepa enlarged him within a 16x16 pixel grid at the suggestion of the original publisher

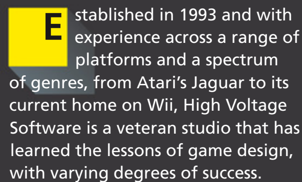


Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

Quantum3 science

Wii development isn't for everyone, but with its in-house engine High Voltage has learned how to make a feast from Nintendo's ingredients





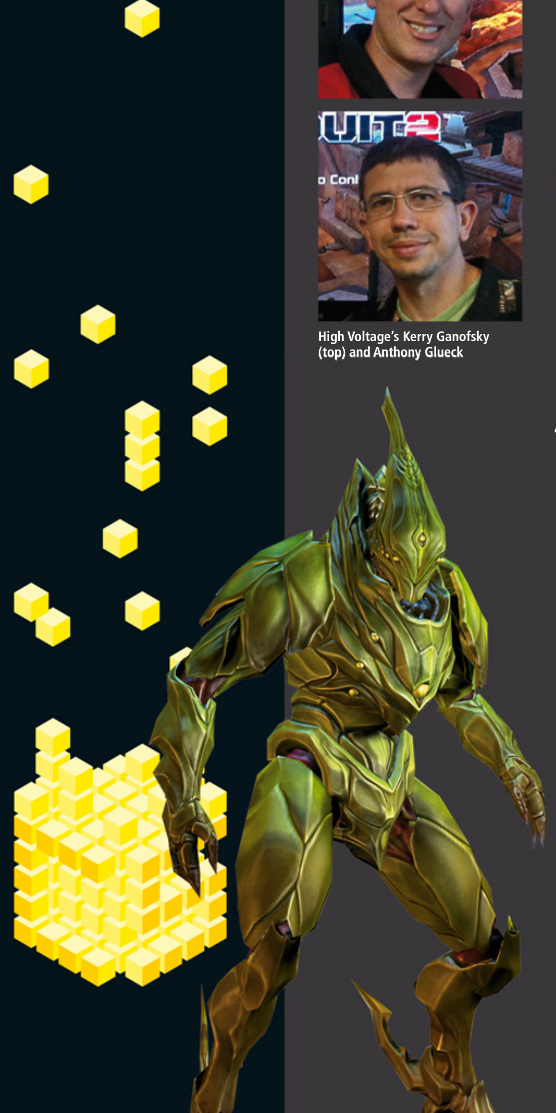
High Voltage's Kerry Ganofsky (top) and Anthony Glueck

Established in 1993 and with experience across a range of platforms and a spectrum of genres, from Atari's Jaguar to its current home on Wii, High Voltage Software is a veteran studio that has learned the lessons of game design, with varying degrees of success.

With *The Conduit*, the Illinois-based studio went headfirst into the murky waters of Wii FPS development. The result met mixed reviews, but received widespread praise for its technical sophistication. Second time around, High Voltage is going deeper, transferring knowledge to, and improving technology for, the sequel. "[*The Conduit*] taught us that the Wii is actually a very capable system if you develop your tech for it," says studio founder **Kerry Ganofsky**. "While making *The Conduit*, we were also developing our Quantum3 engine. Between the time we hit alpha and when we shipped, we had continued to make improvements to the technology which allowed our teams to re-evaluate the limitations of the platform for the sequel. As you can see in *Conduit 2*, the improvements have paid off rather well."

> **"The Conduit taught us that the Wii is actually a very capable system if you develop your tech for it"**

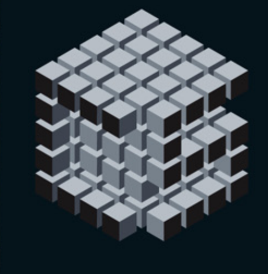
The proprietary Quantum3 engine is the driving force behind High Voltage's ambitions, laying the foundations and setting the boundaries for what the studio can realise, as software development director **Anthony Glueck** explains: "Since the initial *Conduit*, we've made quite a few upgrades to the engine and the tool chain supporting it. We found several places to implement memory savings through palletised normal maps, more flexible texture libraries, and optimised VFX texture usage." Tidying up rough edges and coaxing out every ounce of processing power were clearly goals for the sequel, and it takes an in-depth knowledge – along with some high-end tools – to handle the workload. "We found





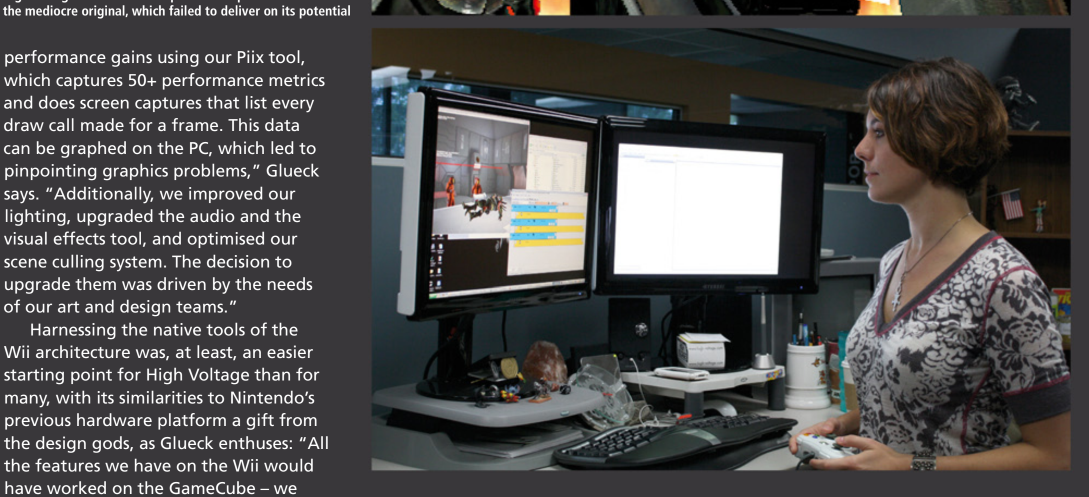
The Quantum3 tech enables enhanced lighting effects alongside improvements to non-visual elements such as audio







High Voltage has the tools in place to help *Conduit 2* outshine the mediocre original, which failed to deliver on its potential



performance gains using our Piix tool, which captures 50+ performance metrics and does screen captures that list every draw call made for a frame. This data can be graphed on the PC, which led to pinpointing graphics problems," Glueck says. "Additionally, we improved our lighting, upgraded the audio and the visual effects tool, and optimised our scene culling system. The decision to upgrade them was driven by the needs of our art and design teams."

Harnessing the native tools of the Wii architecture was, at least, an easier starting point for High Voltage than for many, with its similarities to Nintendo's previous hardware platform a gift from the design gods, as Glueck enthuses: "All the features we have on the Wii would have worked on the GameCube – we simply couldn't have done as much of it. This accelerated our Wii development. Additionally, we used a great deal of abstraction that allowed us to use the TEV stages as generic texture stages, and create a device manager that allowed for handling cached and controlled draw states, reducing the state change costs in the graphics pipeline. Lights, textures, texture coordinates and TEV stages became resources, allowing us to innovate some clever rendering effects."

Realtime assessment of TEV (used for pixel-shading effects) was crucial to High Voltage's aim at conjuring visuals few have attempted on Wii. Glueck elaborates: "Using all the available system level hooks provided by Nintendo, we created a tool in which we could step through each draw call, analyse the Z-buffer at any time, and evaluate TEV commands as they happened. Currently, this tool has almost all of the same capabilities as the ones found on other platforms." Working within the Wii hardware's constraints required close collaboration between artistic and technical staff. "Working with artists, our engineers could see why certain art objects took longer than others to render," Gleuck explains. "Iteration loops were created in which artists could tweak their content to reduce performance demands and achieve their artistic desires. Also, since we were adding splitscreen play, we enhanced our tool chain to automatically reduce content resource demands."

There are few studios willing and able to put as much time and resources into the pursuit of hardware happiness, and Glueck puts this down to Nintendo's original template alleviating much of the tech burden: "Nintendo has pushed gameplay over raw hardware capability, creating a graphical interface that lends itself to easy development of simple graphics. Developing the rendering techniques on the Wii was not easy, and didn't come with a ShaderX book. So, we invested time and energy into this engine. Our decision to make *Conduit* Wii-only allowed us to make it special, exploiting all its hardware strengths." Ganofsky concurs that many studios aren't as committed to a long-term investment: "Most development studios look at the Wii platform as a quick-ship platform where they can maximise returns by creating simple games for the masses. We took a different attitude toward the platform. While we definitely want to maximise returns, we want to develop software that gamers enjoy. This method of thinking is what led us to develop the Quantum3 engine. We knew we were making a long-term investment in the Wii hardware and we believe that, through that investment, we will deliver games that people want to buy and love to play."



The engine overhaul

Glueck explains some of the specifics behind Quantum3's improved performance: "For *Conduit 2*, our refraction shader material system was extended and optimised along with our Chromozone colour modulation. The chromatic separation effect is visually stunning – the effect separates the RGB components of a pixel and shifts them independently around the screen. To complement all of *The Conduit*'s full-screen effects, we've now added the ability to do these effects on only portions of the screen controlled by a dynamic mesh. Since the Wii supports single-bone hardware stitching, we've extended the material system to exploit that. Non-linear distortion effects have been added to the UI system allowing us to make the HUD appear as if it were projected on to a visor. There is a weapon in the game that affects the way a character looks, and for this weapon we extended our distortion shader."


METROID™
Other M

GET INTO GAMES

ADVICE ON A CAREER IN INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT FROM THE INDUSTRY ITSELF

A reality check doesn't have to be deflating, and debunking a few myths doesn't have to shatter dreams. If there's been a flaw in previous years' Get Into Games, it's been to neglect that vital starting point in most developers' careers: inspiration. Those games that are so surprising, edifying or just plain spectacular that you decide, "Yup, that's the job for me". Then you play on and realise just what that must entail: the commitment, confidence and – once in a while – just the right amount of arrogance, too. Maybe also a passport, a friend in the right place or a stroke of luck when applying for a dreaded visa.

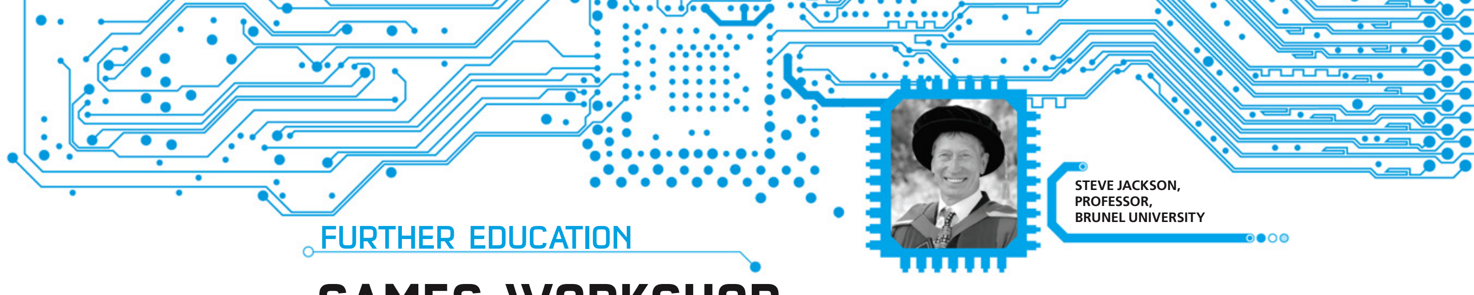
These are the things you don't tend to read about in manuals, prospectuses and the occasional recruitment guide. This year, together with the usual words of wisdom from the industry's foremost teachers, mentors and employers, we're giving them their dues.

Helping us will be the maker of the most hotly anticipated, ambitious shooter of 2012, Irrational Games. Taking a few moments out from making *BioShock Infinite*, it's volunteered a wealth of insight from all corners of the company, from a conversation with Ken Levine to thoughts of home from its UK recruits. Then we have Steve Jackson, no stranger to these pages and a professor at Brunel University who thinks he's got the course for you. Simon Miles of Codemasters, meanwhile, tells us what he's looking for in an applicant. Which leaves Crytek, with its army of modders and the towering *Crysis 2*, to show how a sandbox can help shape your career.

For much more Get Into Games, visit our online resource (next-gen.biz/gig2010), which includes sections on iOS and XBLA development, along with additional expert interviews.

Whatever the platform, the journey to the top doesn't have to take a lifetime. The bad news is that you still need experience to get experience. The good news is that the experience can come now, for free, if you know where to look and resolve to find it.





STEVE JACKSON, PROFESSOR, BRUNEL UNIVERSITY

FURTHER EDUCATION

GAMES WORKSHOP

Ignore the sceptics, says industry legend Steve Jackson: there's still a lot to learn through higher education



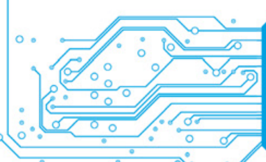
Brunel is located in Uxbridge, and named after the famed engineer

Earning legions of fans with the book series of the same name, Professor **Steve Jackson** knows all about fighting fantasy. It is, after all, a key part of his job as co-tutor at Brunel University, home to the Digital Games Theory and Design MA.

Co-founder of Games Workshop and Lionhead, author of books that together have sold 16 million copies, designer of telephone adventure game FIST and declared 'Best Individual Gamer In Europe' in 1993, his theories are not to be taken lightly. But with the vocational worth of university courses under renewed scrutiny, his latest game is far from over.

Recent surveys by the likes of The Prince's Trust have prompted scare stories about university leavers ending up on the dole, while elsewhere there's evidence that university applications are on the rise. How do you perceive the situation?

Both true. University applications are on the rise because there are fewer jobs. And surely the chances of finding a job are greater if you have qualifications? So bring on the qualifications! Well, yes. But always bear in mind: if you chose to go for qualifications in non-vocational courses, don't expect your employment opportunities to have been improved. Spending three years studying philosophy or politics or the history of art may be very interesting for you, but when you're applying for a job as an IT salesman, or for a junior place in an accounts department, your situation hasn't improved at all. Three years have gone by and now you owe the government £15,000. And your contemporaries, who chose to look for work experience, are now on the employment ladder. In my opinion, unless they are brilliantly academic, students should be considering vocational courses.



"THE STUDENTS WHO FARE BEST ARE THOSE WHO USE THE TIME TO IMMERSE THEMSELVES IN THE COURSE AND PREPARE FOR THE INDUSTRY"

How have the courses at Brunel evolved over the last year?

The big change as far as we've been concerned has been the introduction of the three-year BA degree. With 20-odd students being accepted for the first year, we consider that a success.

Given the speed at which the industry moves, how much and how often do the courses tend to change?

The industry's changing as fast as we can keep up. Two years ago we covered mainly the design of triple-A-type games. Last year the buzzword was apps, Flash games, etc. This year it's social networking and casual games. Who knows what 2011–12 has in store?

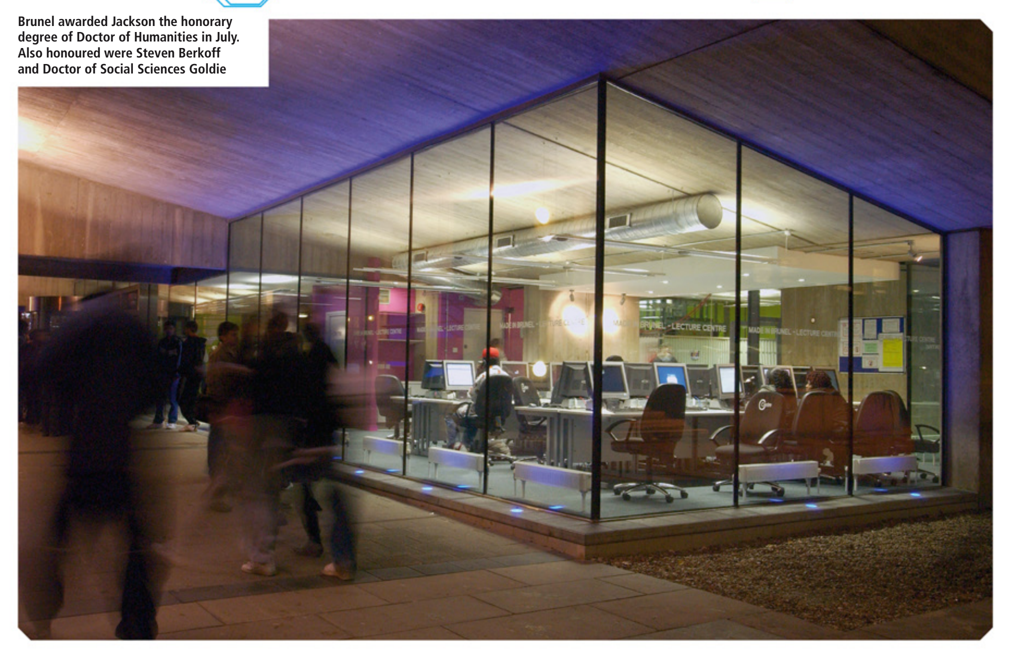
There's always the question nowadays of whether it's even worth going to uni, what with the number of modders and hobbyists being recruited directly. What would be your advice to people facing that dilemma?

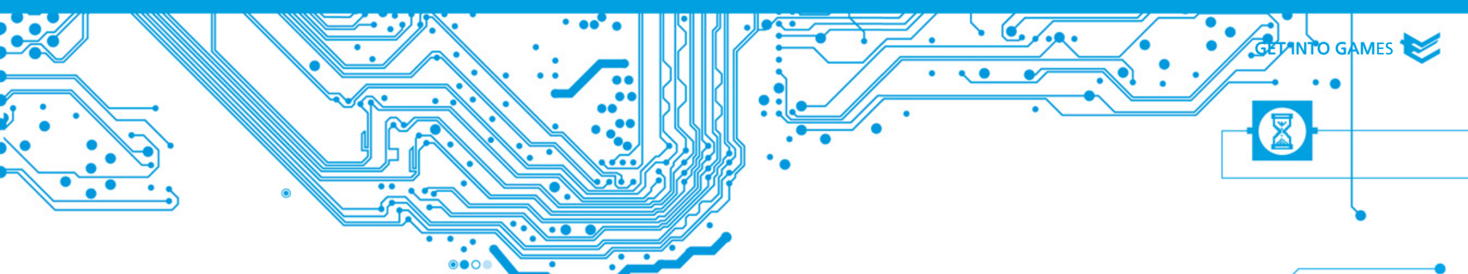
I always tell my students: the truth is, the industry is mainly looking for experience. Especially in non-technical areas of game development, experience is preferred to qualifications. But this presents a chicken-and-egg situation. If employers only want experience, how do you get experience in the first place? The answer is that there will always be some opportunities for those with no experience. And when two inexperienced candidates are applying for a job, the one with the qualification will be preferred to the one without. Plus, where courses have links with the industry, as we do at Brunel, outstanding students will stand out and may be hired ahead of experienced candidates.

Does the course offer any guidance for handling the industry's volatility?

We don't try to pull the wool over our

Brunel awarded Jackson the honorary degree of Doctor of Humanities in July. Also honoured were Steven Berkoff and Doctor of Social Sciences Goldie









The 2010 Times Good University Guide placed Brunel in 47th place; the Guardian's put it at 53rd

students' eyes. This is a creative industry, like movies, TV or music, and in all creative industries there are booms and busts. The games industry is a great place to work and is still expanding, but it's also a high-risk industry so we will get stories where multimillion-dollar projects flop and bring their developers down in the process. This has always been happening in the industry. There is no such thing – yet – as job security in this business. But then there is no job security anywhere, is there?

How vital is it that students establish contacts and get their foot in the door while still in education? Is the life of a roaming job hunter that much harder?

Some of our students come to Brunel and coast through the course, doing just as much as they need to make grades and graduate. Most of them get a rude shock when they go out into the workplace. The students who fare best are those who use the time to immerse themselves in the course and prepare for the industry. They don't spend all their time playing games – any moron can do that – but instead they learn how to do modding, level design and build up their portfolios and CVs with experience. The ones who use their time in education for the good of their future careers are the ones who will have future careers in the games industry.

Brunelgamers.com is a great idea and always seems up to date – how did that come about?

That was started independently of the game design courses. I think it was going even before the MA course started. But we do have close links. Many of the students join the games society and many of the society members come along to sit in on our guest lectures.

When people like Rob McLachlan of Creative Assembly and Ian Livingstone give talks to students, what's the most common advice they tend to give?

The students really value the experience of having real people from the industry come to talk to them. And we've been very lucky to be able to get well-known figures to come along and share their experience – people like Rob and Ian, Peter Molyneux, Mark Healey and Alex Evans, even **Edge** staff Tony Mott and Alex Wiltshire. And last year we were honoured to have Reiner Knizia [see **E**212] as a guest speaker. Reiner is a board game designer; in fact, he's the most prolific game designer in history, with something like 500 titles being published.

We encourage our speakers to tell it like it is and paint a realistic – not just a rosy – picture of the industry and their own experience. We have had one or two who effectively said, "Don't bother!" But mostly our guests offer really useful advice on how to get into the industry, what's important and what's not. Modding, level design, PowerPoint and website work can be shown to a future employer. Also, of course, it creates excellent assessment work. We even use our industry contacts to adjudicate in a roleplaying exercise called The Game Game. The students have to pitch game designs to the industry adjudicators. They're really nervous about presenting in this way to 'real' people, but afterwards they feel exhilarated. The Game Game is one of the highlights of the course.



When not gaming, students can make use of Brunel's UEFA-class football facilities, competition-standard athletics complex and refurbished sports and fitness centre

SIMON MILES,
TALENT SEARCH AND SELECTION OFFICER,
CODEMASTERS

INSIDE KNOWLEDGE

THE IDEAL CANDIDATE

Want to find out what publishers and developers look for? Simon Miles has the answers



Codemasters' Guildford studio is home to the team making *Bodycount*

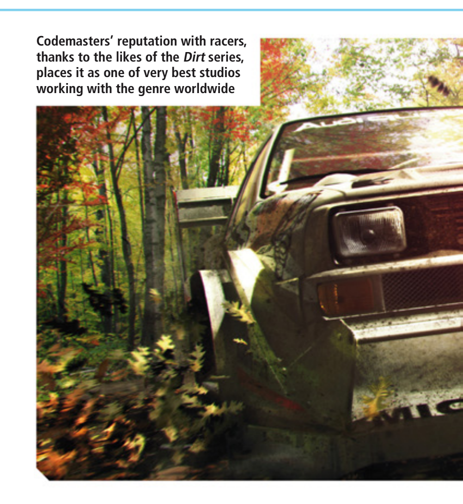
Codemasters must be doing something right. After burning a few fingers with its thirdparty push, it's gone back to basics with strong brands (*Dirt*, *Grid*, *Formula 1* and *Operation Flashpoint*), the odd experiment (stylish FPS *Bodycount*), and a close network of UK studios using shared powerhouse technology. And despite a few headline departures over recent months, it's done so without haemorrhaging talent. Its recruitment expert **Simon Miles** tells us about his work.

One of our other interviewees has accused an employer of valuing seniority over creativity. How prevalent is that?
In my two-and-a-half years here, I've never seen that happen. If we restructure departments, then we obviously follow legal guidelines, and the only restructure we've had in that time is when we laid off 100 QA staff because they'd come to the ends of their contracts. So, no, absolutely not. It's something we'd definitely avoid. We wouldn't go for the experienced people over creatives. Everybody would be marked on a selection criteria and we follow the HR legal guidelines on that.

Are those guidelines pretty much the same as for any employer?
Absolutely. If we've got ten experienced designers, we can't just go in and say we want to make Bill, Bob and Ben redundant and keep the others – they'd all go through exactly the same selection criteria. Their line managers would have a skills matrix of what they thought was essential in the role, and they're marked accordingly against that. Whatever score they get then allocates whether they're successful in keeping their job or whatever. Luckily, we haven't had to go down that line in the studios – we're growing, not laying people off. But that's the process we'd go through, and we do that whatever level they are, whether it's the people who cut the grass outside or development directors.

Does Codemasters have a firm framework for its interviews, or is it left to the individuals conducting them?
We definitely have a framework. We have to be realistic, though. We do around 50 interviews a week here. When you think that's a minimum of an hour's time for each face-to-face interview, that's 50 hours out of a guy's week straight away. And we do telephone interviews as well.

Once people get submitted to our recruitment system, they have a structured telephone interview. Each manager will have their own style, although we do have interview guidelines. Then we'd move to a face-to-face, where they'd probably be here for an hour or two. Possibly a technical test if they're in tools or central tech; possibly not if they can demonstrate a seniority in their experience during the interview.



Codemasters' reputation with racers, thanks to the likes of the *Dirt* series, places it as one of very best studios working with the genre worldwide

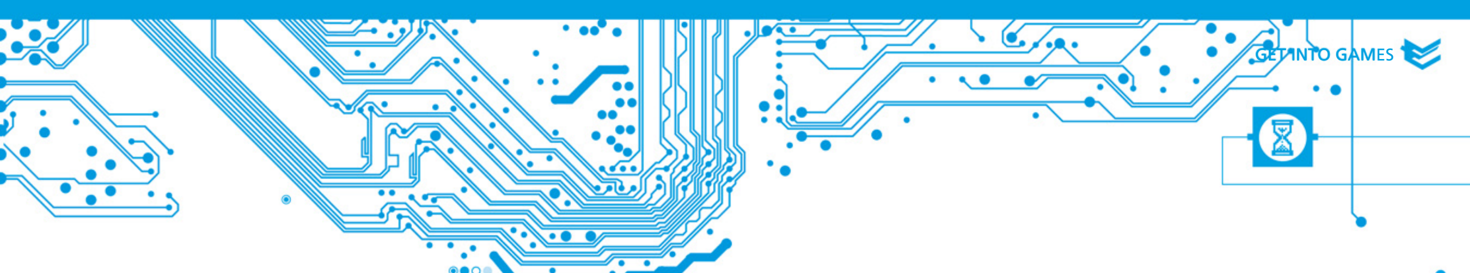
At the end of that, we'll make a decision based on that one face-to-face interview. We don't go down a two- or three-day process. I know certain companies get them in to work for two days – that's great and we'd love to do it but, with the numbers we need to recruit, we'd never have the time.

How about their social integration? Is it as much about that person 'fitting in'?
Studio fit is a very big one. Just little things like if they've flown in or travelled down, either myself or one of my team will take them out, whether or not we think they'll be a successful interviewee. Because a job move isn't just about the job. We give them an idea of living costs in the area, show them the sort of environment they'll be living in. And we can also then tailor the offer to them. So we can find out info that isn't technical, such as if they need to be close to a school, if they don't drive – we have a staff minibus – or if they need a certain amount of relocation aid.

Gone are the days when we could just sit back and go, "Actually, people will just send us their CVs because we're Codemasters". Many, many years ago, maybe.

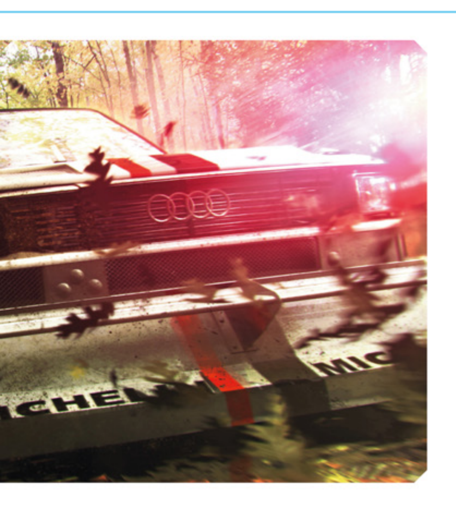


Upcoming FPS *Bodycount* is partly the work of staff who previously worked on Criterion's *Black*. It's similarly explosive, but takes destructibility to new heights



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How specifically should someone tailor their CV for Codemasters, as opposed to their general goal or discipline?
Any proactive candidate now, to stand out, I'd expect their portfolio to reflect the work that we do. We don't make 'fluffy bunny' games, as we affectionately call them. If we get someone who's a character artist and that's what we see, we'll go back and say, "We need more realism". If they can't then do that then it's already answered the question: they're not going to suitable.

It's a common [misconception] in certain education establishments that you have one portfolio. I don't agree with that at all. In my working life, I'd always tailor my CV to the company I was sending it to and for that particular position. That's what we'd expect here. And that's what we expect when a CV lands on our desk. We average about 700 CVs a month, and the vast majority of those are sort of entry-level people trying to get into games. So when we get the standard portfolio and standard CV, we will, as human beings, obviously not treat it as well as someone who does tailor their portfolio.

We're dealing with quite a few colleges and universities at the moment to get them to do their portfolio modules in the first year, not the last. Because they need that extra time to start working on it.

So, yes, I'd certainly recommend that to anyone. They're all gamers, that's the thing. It's not as though it's something new to them. So it always surprises me when we get something and it's totally unrelated to Codemasters. Unfortunately, it's possibly the agencies we get more of those CVs from, because they get one copy and send it out.

Does Codemasters have its own internal training programmes?
It's not something we have formally, because it would take a lot of resources and we're not at the size where we'd require it. But we do uni visits, and when they come down for the day it's not just: "This is a development studio. Isn't it pretty?" They actually do practical exercises set by the design teams, so they can highlight the areas in the course that aren't suitable for the industry, and they feed back directly to the tutors.

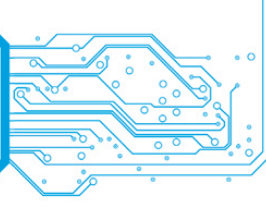
What would you say is the most common flaw in candidates?
Generic CVs. And I'm not talking just about portfolios here. It still makes me chuckle that someone who's supposed to be creative, and has gone to university and want us to invest £20 million in game development and trust them with it, would still use Word wizards to produce their CV. It's great to see that maybe they've been working. I understand people have to pay bills and work in Tesco or Sainsburys, but I wouldn't expect that to take up three-quarters of their CV, and then their hobbies reads: 'Oh, and I play games'.

I want to see a passion for games in those CVs. I want to know what they're playing, what consoles they're using and why they want to work in the industry. Give me that any day. I want it laid out properly. If they want to be a bit creative and use some of their artwork – if they're an artist – [then that's] fantastic.

I'll give you a couple of quick examples. We have a lady here at the moment who's flown through the ranks of our UI team, and her CV arrived literally in my lap two years ago. It arrived special delivery, was wrapped in silk, and inside had this fully designed leaflet and portfolio selling herself as a graphic designer, a UI designer. That's exactly what we want.

We had a level designer send us his CV on a USB [drive] in the shape of a bullet, and he'd etched his name on the bullet and had it delivered in a camouflage packet directly to us. He's now a designer on *Operation Flashpoint*. And that probably cost each of them something like ten quid, but they both got interviews and they've both got jobs, because they stood out.

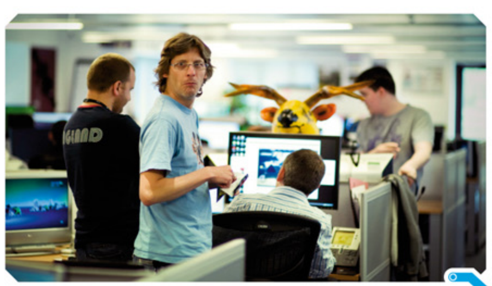
"I WANT TO SEE A PASSION FOR GAMES. I WANT TO KNOW WHAT THEY'RE PLAYING, WHAT CONSOLES THEY'RE USING AND WHY THEY WANT TO WORK IN THE INDUSTRY"



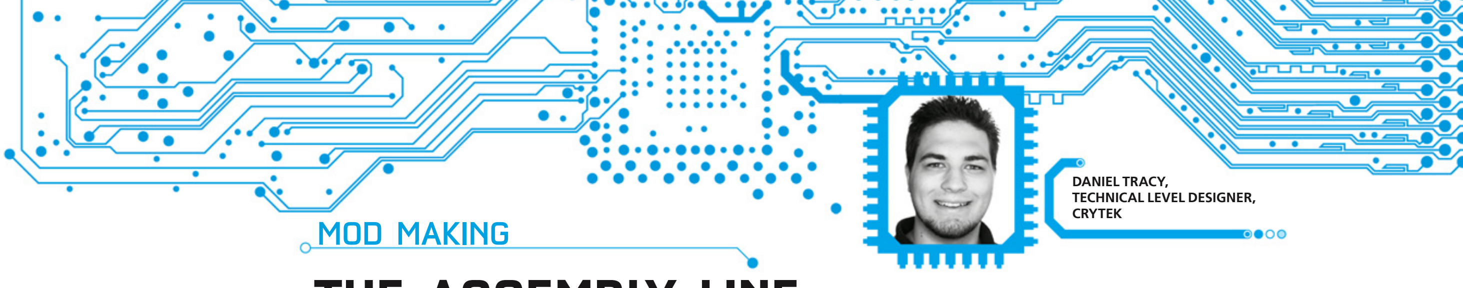


Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising **makes use of Codemasters' extensive in-house R&D via the company's EGO Engine, also used in its racing games**





Codemasters' main development facility in Warwickshire employs hundreds of staff, making it one of the largest studios in the UK, but as well as its offshoot in Guildford it also operates a satellite studio in Malaysia. With about 700 CVs arriving per month, the company is hardly short of applicants for its various open roles



DANIEL TRACY, TECHNICAL LEVEL DESIGNER, CRYTEK

THE ASSEMBLY LINE

Why modding remains one of the surest ways to build your reputation





Crytek's debut game, *Crysis*, was a showcase for its CryEngine tech, which has since moved on to its third iteration. Despite its formidable power, it is supremely user-friendly

Over the years, Crytek has positioned itself as a lodestone for the industry's most active job hunters: the mod community. Its opus, *Crysis*, scored highly in **E**183 for several reasons – its commitment to handing much of its toolset to those of a creative bent among them. Now that's paying dividends for Crytek, with a generation of CryEngine veterans moving on to its teams. **Daniel 'Kamikaze' Tracy** and **Morgan 'Toth' Kita** started their journey together on the CryEngine 2 mod *MechWarrior: Living Legends*.

How did you end up at Crytek?
Dan Tracy: My brother [fellow Crytek employee Sean Tracy] and I worked hand-in-hand throughout most of our modding background. [Then] we got Morgan hired later on, just earlier this year.
Morgan Kita: My background wasn't in gaming – I was in biotech. But I picked up modding as I moved between jobs and found it incredibly enjoyable… So I worked for a few months, they [the Tracys] bumped me up to lead programmer, and a few months ago they put my name in here at Crytek.



"IT'S ABOUT SHOWING YOUR CREATIVITY AND YOUR ABILITY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS. NOT EVERYTHING YOU DO WILL BE DIRECTLY APPLICABLE"

Is Crytek still sympathetic towards mods when it hires people from them? Is it happy to let those people carry on developing their mods?
MK: Yeah, so far. I've still been very involved in the project, although I have less time than before. It really comes down to keeping a relatively active team and making sure that if you lose a member, the whole thing doesn't fall apart. You have to have people in all the positions, [with] duplication for each role. And when they do leave, you try to encourage them to train the other people for whatever position's been lost.

Are the qualities you picked up applicable to professional work?
DT: I think it really depends on what role you end up applying for. Tony Davis, my producer, hired me for both my technical knowledge and leadership background after forming the *MechWarrior* project. And he fully expected me to develop into more of a leadership role. My position doesn't actually require me to do that, but it definitely helps the rest of my colleagues because they get inspired by what I do and I try to promote their ideas, and fight for what they believe should go into the game… It's definitely a key element for leaders within mods to have, and persistence, too: first, to get into the industry, and second, to keep that mentality to fight for your ideas and what you believe in. And in the end, the more creative the team – I don't want to say stubborn…
MK: I think that's fair, actually.
DT: The stubbornness of being able to share and push your ideas portrays you as a stronger personality, and I think that really helps anywhere. Any sort of designer – be it level designer or game designer, even programmer – really benefits from that.

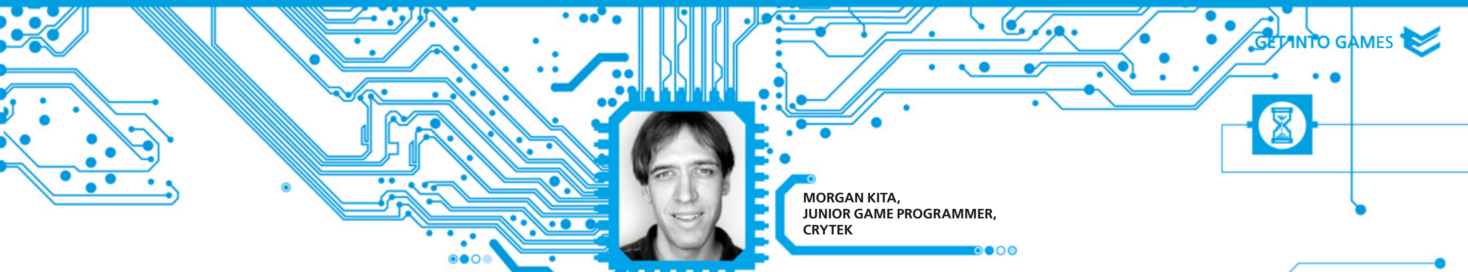
On the flipside, can having that much autonomy and drive cause friction when working in large professional groups?
DT: You've got to be very selective about when and where you bring your new ideas to your leads, or whoever you might be employed underneath.
MK: I don't think having a mod background necessarily pushes you in one direction or another. It really comes down to the individual qualities of the person.

Is Crytek still pretty unusual in its commitment to modders, or is that fairly industry-wide now?
DT: I wouldn't say it's industry-wide at all. Crytek has specifically looked and picked up a lot more modders than other employers. I worked at BioWare before, but it was really hard for me to maintain my position there. A lot of game companies now look for seniority rather than creative spark. Also, Crytek is relatively young in terms of triple-A developers. It was a lot easier for BioWare to look at more of the experienced developers who have actually been in the industry and shipped triple-A titles before, whereas I had none at the time. So it neglected to continue my employment, unfortunately.
MK: The only thing I'd add is that developers who provide quality tools are a dying breed. Certainly, five years ago it was more common. Crytek's really maintained that.

Why is it dying off? Is it because publishers now want to try to monetise that kind of post-launch content?
MK: Partly, but it's the move to consoles as well. And modding on console has just never really taken off. The framework isn't there. There's XNA, but it's still relatively limited.
DT: And relatively expensive, where modders have a limited budget. Modders usually come either straight out of university or they're still in university, so they have loans and such to deal with. So they look for other experience, and modding's the way to go.

What additional learning is there to do when you graduate from modding to professional development?
DT: For me, it was a huge transition, because I'd never been outside of Canada. So the culture shock was the biggest thing. But in terms of actually fitting in at Crytek, it was fairly easy. I found a lot of other employees came from a similar modding background, and you have that sort of brotherhood mentality, coming from the same sort of

Crytek actively monitors the modding community, bringing the cream in-house to contribute to its commercial projects



MORGAN KITA,
JUNIOR GAME PROGRAMMER,
CRYTEK

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GAMER CAMP PRO

scenario, where you have a successful mod or series of levels you've developed for a game. You compare those experiences. And it was helpful to find that Crytek was a relatively English-speaking company. Living in Germany's been a bit difficult because I'm not a native German-speaker.

Technically speaking, it's been really easy, since I was working with CryEngine for two or three years prior to my employment. A technical artist got hired around the same time as I did, and we were doing relatively easy tasks to get used to the workflow. And he's asking me: "How do you do all this technical stuff? This is really difficult to understand off the bat." And I'm like, "Don't worry about it – I've been doing it for a couple of years already."

MK: You have to work with what you have, and if you don't have much gaming experience outside of a particular engine, you want to focus on the companies that use it. That makes all the difference.

How obscure can your mod be while still being attractive to a developer?

MK: At the end of the day, it's about showing your creativity and your ability to solve problems. Not everything you do will be directly applicable wherever you go in the industry. You work on one thing, then you work on something else, although obviously you specialise.

If you were asked by, say, a 16-year-old whether or not they should bother with university, what would you say?

MK: It really depends on the position you want. If you're interested in programming, then you should go to university, really. It's not going to teach you everything, but it'll give you a basis to work from, without which it'd be extremely challenging.

DT: It was completely different for me, because I've never gone to university, never got a degree. I went straight out of high school into work, and then in my spare time I was doing a lot of the mod process. As Morgan said, it depends on what you're going for, and it depends on how much you can self-teach. I self-taught a lot of 3DS Max, as well as just learning the Sandbox. I ended up doing some QA work for BioWare, and that helped me understand a lot of the main processes. It [involved] a lot of reverse-engineering what was already done in order to learn the major things.

What I usually found when I interviewed modders for my own team, who came from a university [background], was that they ended up being very limited in terms of what they'd think about… They wouldn't think outside the box and try to go round and figure things out for themselves. They stayed within their safety bubble. So it's a catch between what you know and what you want to know; that's the bottom line, I guess.

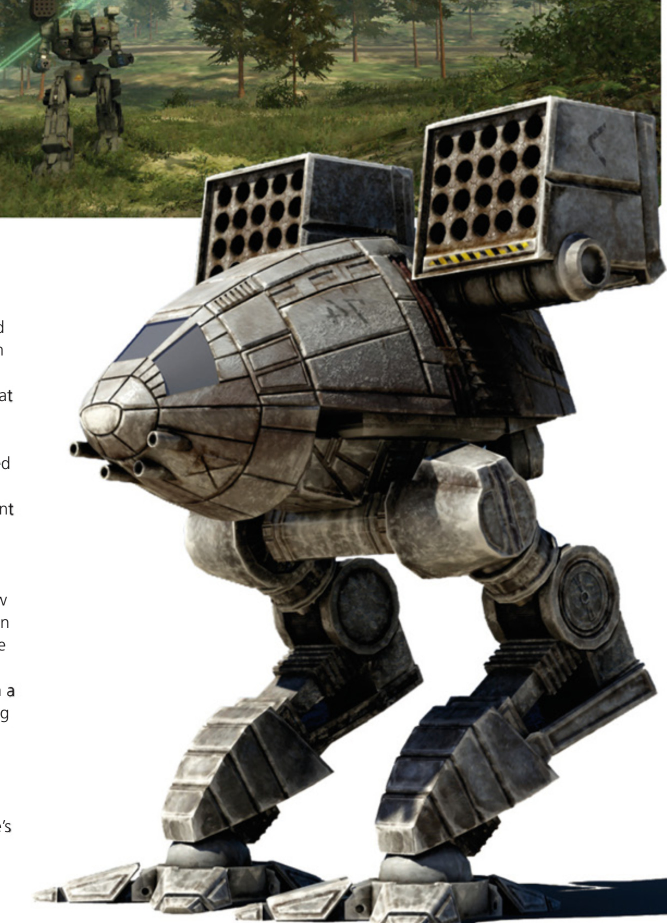


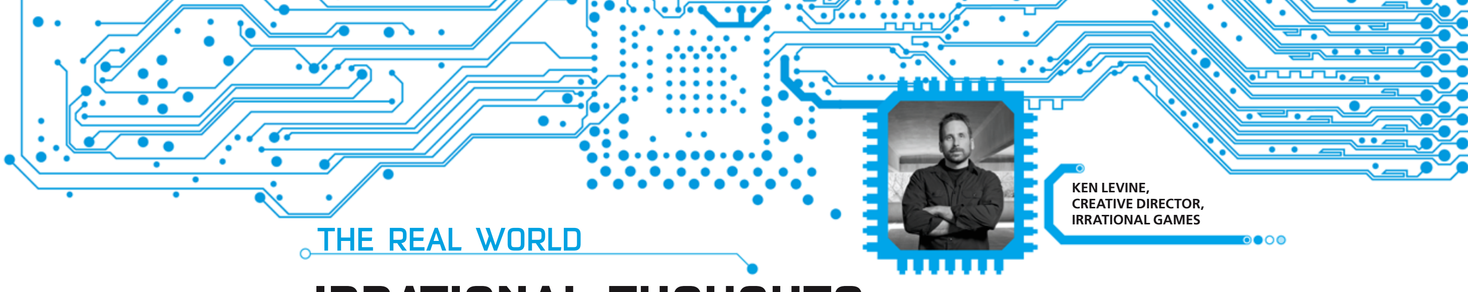
***MechWarrior: Living Legends* makes fine use of CryEngine 2. Having a working game to show off in an interview is a huge benefit to any job application**

The portfolio is still king, then.

DT: Absolutely. If you can go to an interview with a working mod, something concrete on your laptop or a DVD, and play it right there and tell people about it, that's huge.

MK: From a programming side, working on a side project and implementing an interesting feature, that's OK, but integrating it into a fully working game means a lot more. And for an artist, it's not just putting together a high-quality model, but putting it together in-engine and having it run properly – there's a huge difference between the two. A lot of modders run into that problem if they just do something on their own.





THE REAL WORLD

IRRATIONAL THOUGHTS

Getting into the game industry, by those who've done it



Irrational Games' *BioShock* will be followed in 2012 by *BioShock Infinite*

To the enraptured viewer of the recent *BioShock Infinite* trailer, the mysteries of game production might seem just as impenetrable as those of Columbia, its magnificent flying city. The same could be said of so many games that tell incredible stories, visit awe-inspiring worlds and conjure magical experiences from just a blank screen. Thankfully, that's one secret Irrational Games is happy to let slip as we poll its staff for some tales of their own.

Q&A: KEN LEVINE

Role: Creative director
Origin: US

A student of the liberal arts, a screenwriter and a playwright before he knocked on the door of famed developer Looking Glass Studios, **Ken Levine** has seen an embryonic industry evolve to rival Hollywood itself.

"HOW DO YOU INTERPRET DESIGNS AND INTENTIONS? HOW DO YOU TELL DESIGNERS THEY'RE HIGH AND THAT WHAT THEY WANT TO DO IS NOT POSSIBLE?"

Having made his name with the story and design premise of *Thief: The Dark Project*, he cemented that reputation with the cerebral, captivating *Shock* series.

Who or what did you aspire to when you started out in games?

Well, it was 1995 and there weren't a lot of known people around back then. Even John Carmack – though maybe Lord British because he gave himself an identity even back in the '80s. When I started, I didn't even understand what people did exactly. When it came to my first job I didn't know what that was, I just knew I wanted to do it. There were a couple of games I admired, and Looking Glass was a company I admired, but even then I didn't know that much about who did what there. It was pretty much a black box to me.

We've heard a few stories about some of the gruelling interview processes in the US. How does Irrational do it?

It would be tough to call it a tradition in the US. If you compare the game industry to the movie industry, people in movies are getting together for three or four months and then moving on – that whole group breaks up and then a new group forms to make another movie, and there's a lot of intermixing between the different individuals. Our way of intermixing is much, much lower than that – some of the people at Irrational have been here 12 years. Since Looking Glass, besides Irrational I've only worked for another company for a year and a half. So I certainly took some notions from how Looking Glass did things, but I couldn't really tell you about other companies.

Our recruiting process… We don't really have a recruiting process. We figure out who's going to speak to the person, and generally the person goes to eight or nine sessions with different people from the company. There's no meta-plan going into it.

Everybody's got such specific areas of questioning that, if I'm going to interview a programmer, I'm going to ask very different things to Chris Kline, who's our technical director. I'm going to be saying: "How do you interpret designs and intentions? How do you tell designers that they're high and that what they want to do is not possible? How do you give them information about what your problem set is?"

A guy like Chris or John Abercrombie, our lead programmer, is going to be giving them an actual programming test, a literal test with certain logical challenges. Which would completely baffle me. So, we have a very intuitive process, but we don't have a specific process. Each person who's doing the interview intuits what questions to ask as they're doing it. We don't have a doctrinaire approach to it at all.

Do you hope to be surprised?

Yeah, certainly. Bill Gardner, our lead designer, has developed a test, and a large part of that test is: tell us what we've done wrong. Tell us what you didn't like about



BioShock or our previous games. Tell us what you would have done differently. Tell us your favourite levels, the worst levels – and tell us why. We're very aware of things we could do better in our own games, but we love to see if people can criticise, because that's a very important thing. You don't want someone who's afraid to criticise; you want someone who's not just able to criticise but can do so with a logical underpinning. And some of the best people we've brought in told us something about our own games that completely surprised us in their analysis. If you can't be a good critic, you can't be a good game developer.

What's the most common flaw you tend to find in candidates?

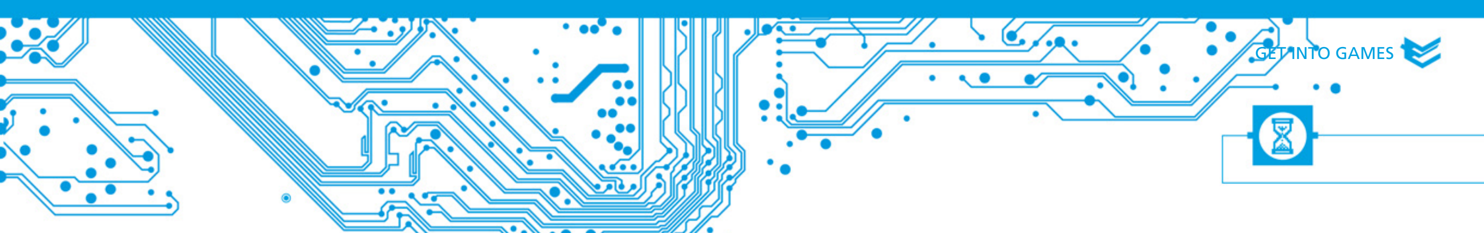
We look for certain trouble spots. I look to see if this person's jumped from job to job to job. That is usually a really, really, really bad sign. And you see it a lot, you really do. It's concerning because, you know, it usually means you're next. There's a lot of it going in the games industry, people with five jobs in four years.

And I always look for: has this person ever shipped anything good in their lives? If you haven't, that doesn't necessarily mean you're not a good candidate. But if you have, if you've consistently been on really good projects, it's usually a good sign.

The last thing is: can you actually turn up and do something good on our project?

ADVICE
DON NORBURY
AI lead

"There's no substitute for hands-on experience. Play with toolsets like UDK or Unity. Start ridiculously small and simple and then expand. Find communities with experienced people. Collaborate, engage, and participate. Teamwork and communication are as important a skill as coding in this industry."



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***BioShock* runs on Unreal Engine tech, and Epic's approachable middleware lends itself well to those looking to get started in the videogame industry**

Or are you very evasive about that? That can really worry you – if you can't find exactly what their role is, and they can't articulate that role.

Doesn't that imply the Catch-22 situation of a newcomer needing experience to get experience?
It's not a Catch-22. We will hire people without experience, absolutely. The question is: what have they done to get themselves experience? Have they been modding? How articulate are they about game development? Have they been studying? What have they tried to figure out? I'm way more impressed by someone who's been making mods than someone who just signed up for a class somewhere. Signing up for a class doesn't mean you've actually done anything. But we've definitely hired modders before.

Is there a general comment there about university education?
Here's the thing: who's teaching these game development courses, and what basis do they have to be a teacher? Because we're in a young industry where the people who've worked in the industry are still working in the industry. It's not like there are a lot of retired people because the industry's only been going for 20 or 30-odd years. And everyone was pretty young when they started back then.

If you're a young teacher, what experience do you have? Do you understand what you're teaching? Because the industry's also dynamic enough where it's constantly changing – so how you develop a game now isn't how you developed a game five years ago. I think it's a really tough job to be a teacher in the game development courses.

Would you sooner recommend a traditional discipline?
Well, my education was liberal arts, and Chris Kline was at MIT. The thing I like about MIT is that they teach you, besides the vocational aspects of any teaching they do, a logical way to approach problems. That's not a videogame-specific thing, that's a science thing. When I started at Looking Glass, the thing I was most inspired by is that they have this approach to fun – to making fun – which was a scientific approach. It certainly helped those guys' craft.

How daunting is it to work for a company making some of the biggest games in the world?
The thing about Irrational is that we're not a huge company – we're only about 100 people now, and that's the biggest for a single project we'll ever be. We don't really have a very hierarchical structure. Only one group of people has an office and it's a shared office, and everybody else is down on the floor, because it's really important that everybody's rubbing elbows with everybody else. What that means is that if you want to come to a company, sit in a corner and get a certain task, and hide and do your little thing, this is not the place for you.

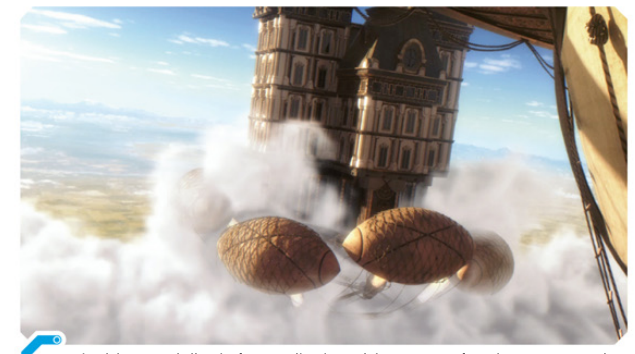
We have an expression here – I'm not sure if it's one you're familiar with in the UK: we use all parts of the buffalo. If we have an employee here and they can do something well, we try to leverage that ability, even if it's not in their job description. Conversely, when people aren't contributing, it's not so much that we find them out but that they find themselves out. They feel unhappy because they're surrounded by all these people making amazing stuff, and they're thinking they don't fit in.

Many people aspire to make games because they've got an idea for the game they want to make. How much should they surrender that desire to 'author' entire projects?
I don't think you surrender that desire to author. I think you should be ready for a group of people who are going to be holding that work to an incredibly rigorous critical standard. So if your idea is absolutely awesome, and you're going to take that in its rough form and work with everybody to get it up on the screen and make it awesome, you're gonna see that idea. It's not like there's a person… at the end of the day, I'm the guy who has the final decision about if this is going to be in the game or not. But I'm not the only person by a long shot who generates the ideas, or executes the ideas. Everybody on the team gets their ideas in the game, but it's a narrow window – it's the eye of a needle. But it's the same for me as well.

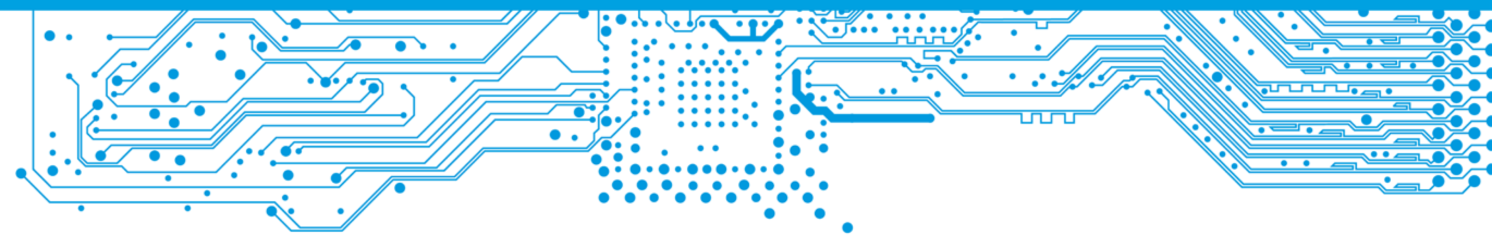
What would you say to people wary of such a volatile industry?
Well, the volatility swings the other way. Look at the iPhone market, for instance. Out of nowhere there are people who are now making their fortune doing something they never even knew existed a couple of years ago. When iPhone came out there was no App Store. So the volatility is positive there. Brian Reynolds going from making RTS games to a very successful social game in *Farmville*: that's incredibly volatile, but a success for him. I'd certainly like to see another *Rise Of Nations* but… On the negative side you have lots of companies

ADVICE
JIM BONNEY
Audio director

"My advice is to be creative in every aspect and approach to your career – not just what you create but also in the ways you find to create. Don't pigeonhole yourself and your possibilities by waiting for the perfect gig, dive into whatever you can find, and do the best work possible. Get to know the other people involved who do great work, learn as much as you can, and look for that next, better opportunity."



Strong level design is a hallmark of Irrational's titles, and the spaces in *Infinite* demonstrate typical flair. With so much content to produce, there's always room for junior designers to make a mark





BioShock's distinctive stylings certainly helped it carve a niche, and sets a good example for upcoming artists. A portfolio of bold, original pieces will get noticed

ADVICE
FRANK DAPONTE
Junior level builder and former QA tester

"My advice would be to figure out what you really want to do and excel at it. Learn to take negative criticism and build on it. Most of all, if you happen to land a gig as a tester, don't go into it thinking you're going to move on right away. Focus on being a tester and master it, prove your worth and opportunities will arise."

who make one wrong move, who for one minute are an established company and the next have challenges ahead of them. But if you don't work volatility, go work in government or the insurance business. You'll be there for many, many years and you'll get your gold watch. I don't know if that exists any more. There's a lot more volatility generally.

Q&A: TIM AUSTIN

Role: Systems designer
Origin: UK

In a world as small as this one, there's nothing irrational about crossing a few borders – or the occasional ocean – to help make your perfect game. Such was the thinking of our interviewees here, who braved the perils of visa applications and culture shocks to make a game called *BioShock Infinite*. Always keen to help, a few of Irrational's locals join in with their advice.

What's your background in the industry?
I've always wanted to make games. I started playing games on my parents' Apple IIe in the very early '80s. I started writing my own games on a BBC Micro, and even got a couple published on British Telecom's pre-internet online service. At that point, I was leaving school and decided I should get some formal training, so I went to university, got myself a degree – barely; I spent most of my revision time playing *Monkey Island 2*. With that I was able to get a junior position at a local dev. During my 13 years in the UK, I've been involved in both the code and design side of all the games I've worked on. At first, due to the tiny size of the team, everyone had to wear multiple hats. Then, later, as teams got bigger, I specialised in design and implementation of gameplay systems.

How daunting was the move to the US?
It was a big step, but I really wanted to work on a dream product – something with mass appeal that was also intelligent and had something to say. Irrational was top of my list. The whole process was fairly swift, and after seeing earlier trailers for what we now know to be *BioShock Infinite* during my interview, I knew that this was what I wanted to work on.

Anecdotes?
Heathrow being snowed in the day I was due to fly out is the most memorable issue, though not particularly funny.

What tips do you have for someone wanting to follow in your footsteps?
Get a university degree. It's tempting to leave education and get straight to work as soon as possible, but that piece of paper comes in handy in all sorts of ways. For instance, getting a US work visa is much easier if you have a degree.

The key to landing the job in the States was opening my mind to the possibilities. Once I'd decided I was only going to apply for dream jobs regardless of where they were, I was surprised at how accommodating Irrational were. The fact that I was in the UK was just a small legal issue; what we could do to make awesome games together was the most important factor.

Any cultural differences?
Boston seems very European. It didn't take long to settle in. The most noticeable thing is how the weather is turned up to 11 here. Summer days are hot as a furnace, it never drizzles, it pours, and there's no such thing as a 'light dusting of snow'.

Missing the UK?
Crunchy Nut Cornflakes. Matteson's Smoked Pork Sausage. Proper gravy. Luckily there's a corner shop just across the road from Irrational that sells imported Yorkies, Bounties and Creme Eggs, so most of the essentials are covered. There are also a few companies in the UK that will go shopping at the local supermarkets and then ship the produce over to you. An order every three months fills the gaps nicely.

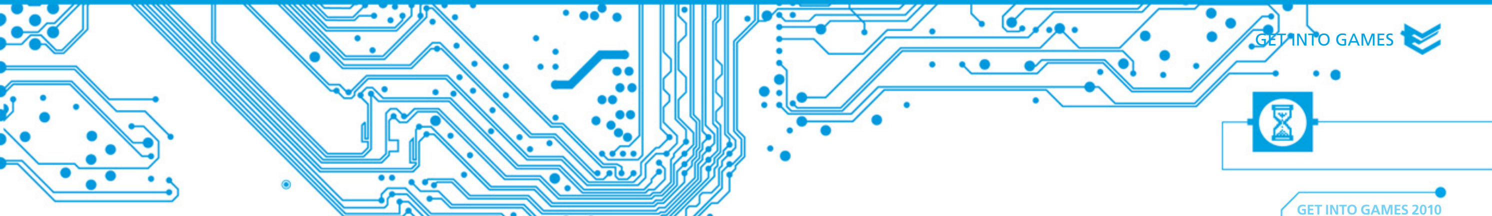
Q&A: AMANDA JEFFREY

Role: Level designer
Origin: UK

What's your background in the industry?
I've been in the industry for nine years, and with Irrational for eight months. I was exceptionally lucky to get in the way I did. I'd worked on the shop floor of a games retailer in Scotland for a couple of years, and got sick and tired of sorting shelves full of uninspired, repetitive games. I decided I could do better.

I researched various games courses and was accepted onto a course in early 2001. Unfortunately, the courses then weren't anywhere near as mature or well done, and after an Easter work placement at Rockstar North, I decided the course wasn't going to get me in the door. I worked for months at home, making singleplayer mod maps in popular engines, writing up level design post mortems for recently released games I'd completed, creating small minigames in DarkBASIC, creating my own level design documents, and applying like mad for any level design jobs across the country.

It was the post-mortem that got me through the door for my first job. It was for



GET INTO GAMES 2010 IN ASSOCIATION WITH GAMER CAMP NANO

a game in the same genre, and I'd picked out the strengths and weaknesses of the game in question and provided potential solutions. I was very lucky to get in this way – usually, level designers come from QA or production first. But having a portfolio that's focused on the sorts of levels you want to create, and what the company you're applying for is looking to build, is key. No point showing off your three best deathmatch maps if you're applying to make singleplayer missions.

How daunting was the move to the US?
Moving to the US from the UK was both more and less nerve-wracking than I thought it would be. The nitty-gritty of the process was handled by Irrational, and there was always someone available to help with visa questions and such. To get over to the US and be eligible for the H1B visa, you need either four years of university degree or ten years of industry experience. I had a mixture of both, which made it slightly more complicated. If you have aspirations to work elsewhere in the world, a degree is the best first-stage key you can have.

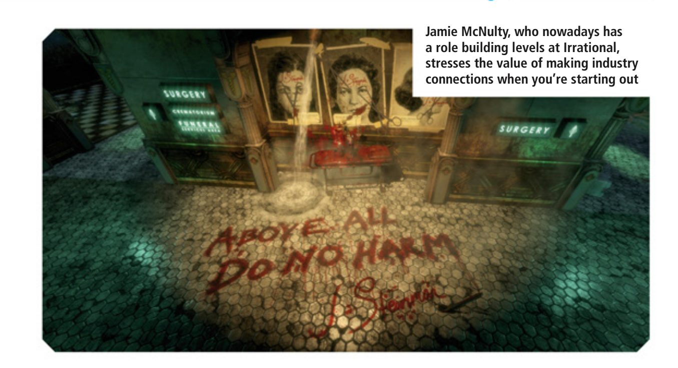
Missing the UK?
I miss Bovril, smoked sausage suppers, 'Snoggable' garlic and Mother's Pride Plain bread. We found a good curry place, but these are few and far between. Boston seems very European in its construction – winding streets and old stone buildings, which will make someone used to UK cities feel a little more at home. There's also good public transport here. Other cities might freak you out with their temporary nature; you won't realise it, but not being surrounded by buildings made 200 years ago has a funny effect on someone used to it.

Q&A: JAMIE MCNULTY
Role: Level builder
Origin: Canada

What's your background?
I knew I wasn't going to get a job without getting noticed or making connections. A lot of industry pros frequent forums, IRC chats, etc. I hung out at polycount.com and posted my work and just generally made myself known. It just happened that someone from Sony Online was looking for some contract modellers. I leapt at the offer to have my work go into a professional project. The work that I did helped me build a portfolio that, two months after I was done with Sony's contract, got me a job at Ubisoft Montreal. I worked my butt off and tried to expand my skills, made some contacts who came here, and then they recommended me. Now I'm an Irrational employee for as long as they'll keep me.

What's it like working on *Infinite*?
I go home feeling like I'm working on something worth doing and excited to be doing it.

It's a project that keeps me creatively satisfied and allows me to explore and grow as an artist. Not many projects I've worked on besides *BioShock 1* have allowed me to feel this way.

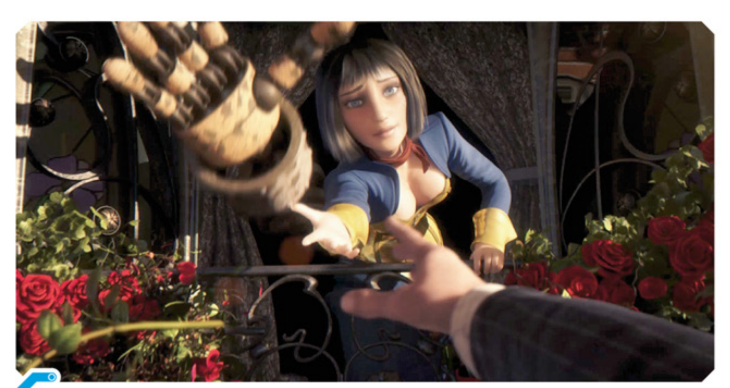


Jamie McNulty, who nowadays has a role building levels at Irrational, stresses the value of making industry connections when you're starting out

"DON'T THINK THAT BECAUSE YOU'RE THE TOP OF YOUR CLASS IN ART SCHOOL YOU HAVE A SHOT. ASPIRE TO BE AS GOOD AS OR BETTER THAN THE PROS OUT THERE"

What tips do you have for someone wanting to follow in your footsteps?
Don't think that because you're the top of your class in art school that you have a shot. Aspire to be as good as or better than the pros you see out there. They are ultimately who you have to compete with to get the jobs. Don't settle for 'good enough for a student portfolio'. I see too many people fresh out of college that only worked on assignments and didn't make their portfolio relevant to the job they're applying to.

What about cultural differences?
Food is different. Even though we're attached but by a silly imaginary line on a map, Oreos, Coke, bologna and other things have a different taste, at least from my experience. And though we Canadians love hockey, Americans love sports fanatically. It's a bit scary; I don't know if I'm going to be entertained or to a battlefield when I go to a live event. And I still enjoy the odd American comment that involves me living in an igloo and or having ridden on a dogsled or some such thing.


Like its predecessor, ***BioShock Infinite*** aims to have personal drama at its core, but few game studios make use of staff with the background of Irrational's Ken Levine, who worked in various storytelling disciplines before making games

ADVICE
JOE FIELDER
Producer

"Internships are a good foot in the door because you have the opportunity to prove – if you have them – an ability to learn quickly, a strong work ethic and a high degree of grace under pressure. If you have those three skills, you can pretty much learn the rest. Working up levels in commercially available software is a great way to break in on the design front, if you can show off scripting skills, a strong understanding of 3D space, and/or a solid sense of pacing and narrative. It's worth mentioning that it's far better to show a small polished area than a rough large level, though. You might have a minute of someone's time to look at video or screenshots of your work before they say 'Meh!' and move on, so you'd better impress quick. There's no room for, 'It gets better…'"



OLIVER WILLIAMS,
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, NTI,
BIRMINGHAM CITY UNIVERSITY

BIRMINGHAM CITY UNIVERSITY

Gamer Camp is a dedicated initiative with a focus on industry involvement

GAMER CAMP

The New Technology Institute, part of Birmingham City University, has introduced Gamer Camp, a training course aiming to make the murky world of game development crystal clear. One of the main criticisms of videogame courses is the lack of industry insight and contemporaneous modules; Gamer Camp bucks the trend by taking developer involvement, from the likes of Codemasters and Rare, to new heights. NTI associate director **Oliver Williams** explains more.



Formerly the City of Birmingham Polytechnic, Birmingham City gained university status in 1992

What does Gamer Camp offer a budding game industry professional?

Most of all, it gives them real preparation for a career in the industry. We offer them the chance to create and publish their very own game, with training and mentoring from developers throughout the process.



"WE TAKE CAMP ATTENDEES THROUGH ALL STAGES OF THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS. THEY GET TO PUT INTO PRACTICE THEIR CORE PROGRAMMING AND ART SKILLS"

The first of the three schemes we'll be running, Gamer Camp: Nano, runs this winter, with aspiring gamemakers working together to create an iPhone, iPod Touch or iPad game based on a brief given by games development companies.

Following one intensive week of skills training, games artists and programmers will work in teams to create a finished product over the course of a month, with help and coaching from games professionals. It's all about giving them a taste of the games industry; helping them to accumulate the type of skills and experience that studios are actually looking for.

There are two other Gamer Camps, Mini and Pro. Mini is a three-month camp and Pro is nine months which has the option for attendees to gain an MA from Birmingham City University. The different camps are focused on delivering games for different platforms – console, handheld and mobile.



The Gamer Camp: Nano strand is focused on developing for iOS devices

What lessons have been learned over the years and within the curriculum?

The key point is that games graduates have to actually be able to build games. Development studios on the whole are far more interested in someone who has already built their own game than those just with a degree. They want to find people who know how to make games work.

At the moment, then, the biggest demand is for programmers, specifically those able to write consistently good quality code. With this in mind we have a ratio of two-thirds programmers and one-third artists on the development teams.

We ensure attendees on Gamer Camp go through every stage of the development process and develop real products using real development hardware.

Also, we don't go OTT on games design. Development studios tend to nurture games designers in-house anyway, so we stress throughout that good games design is in fact everyone's responsibility.

Are strong industry links a core component of the courses?

Without them the course wouldn't work. Guy Wilday, former studio manager at Sega Racing Studios, is our key industry mentor and has developed the course with us. Our approach to working with the industry is to use mentors from games development studios to set real games development briefs and work alongside the teams to deliver their projects. Gamer Camp is like your first year in the games industry.

How do you think students are prepared for the game industry by Gamer Camp?

We take Gamer Camp attendees through all stages of the games development process. They get to put into practice their core programming and art skills and they learn crucial project management and team working skills.



Developer Guy Wilday (above), former head of Sega Racing Studio, Codemasters veteran and the man behind the *Colin McRae Rally* series and the 2007 *Sega Rally* rebirth, collaborated on Gamer Camp and serves as a mentor to students



ZULQIFAR CHOUDRY,
SECTION MANAGER FOR COMPUTING,
UXBRIDGE COLLEGE

UXBRIDGE COLLEGE

Investment in leading-edge tech is helping Uxbridge students get started

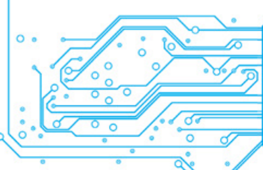


A college course that equips students for university life and study, priming minds for the in-depth disciplines of game production, and laying the first foundations for a career in the industry, Uxbridge College has brains and brawn keeping it in step with the ever-changing world of videogames.

From C++ to Maya and even CryEngine (one of only 11 UK institutes employing the technology), Uxbridge's BTEC National offers a broad range of skills. With advisors such as Sony's London Studio production manager Seb Canniff, there's strong industry support, too. Here, **Zulqifar Choudry**, the college's section manager for computing, elaborates on its goals.

What makes Uxbridge relevant for budding game-makers? How does it equip students for the real world?
Preparing students for the real world is our utmost priority. We continuously consult industry leaders such as Sony Computer Entertainment throughout the development of our courses to ensure the right tools and technologies are taught. Our gaming courses provide the underpinning knowledge and practical skills to give students experience of a realistic working environment and prepare them for industry.

Is the BTEC intended to be a standalone primer for game development?
Our BTEC Level 3 Extended diplomas are designed as standalone primers, although over 85 per cent of our students progress to higher education. These courses have been designed so that students can experience all aspects of games development, from programming in C++ to 3D modelling and animation, before they commit to studying for a three-year degree. Because the BTEC Level 3 is equivalent to three A-levels, our students have the opportunity to progress on to a gaming or other computing-related degree.



"THE GAME INDUSTRY IS COMPETITIVE, SO WE TRY TO IDENTIFY OUR STUDENTS' STRENGTHS. WE ALSO ASSIST IN FINDING THE MOST APPROPRIATE COURSES"

We understand that the game industry is very competitive, so we try to identify our students' strengths. We also assist students in finding the most appropriate HE courses to meet their aspirations. This is what makes studying game development at Uxbridge College a fantastic way to prepare students for a job or progression to higher study.

Many courses are accused of being out of step with a rapidly changing industry – how is Uxbridge addressing this?
We thrive on teaching the latest technologies on all of our courses. We've invested significantly in staff training as well as industry-level software licensing. To ensure that our teaching is at the appropriate level required by industry, we became the first education institution in Europe to integrate the renowned Escape Studios Maya courseware within our curriculum, giving our students a chance to learn to use leading technologies correctly – an advantage for when they go into the industry.



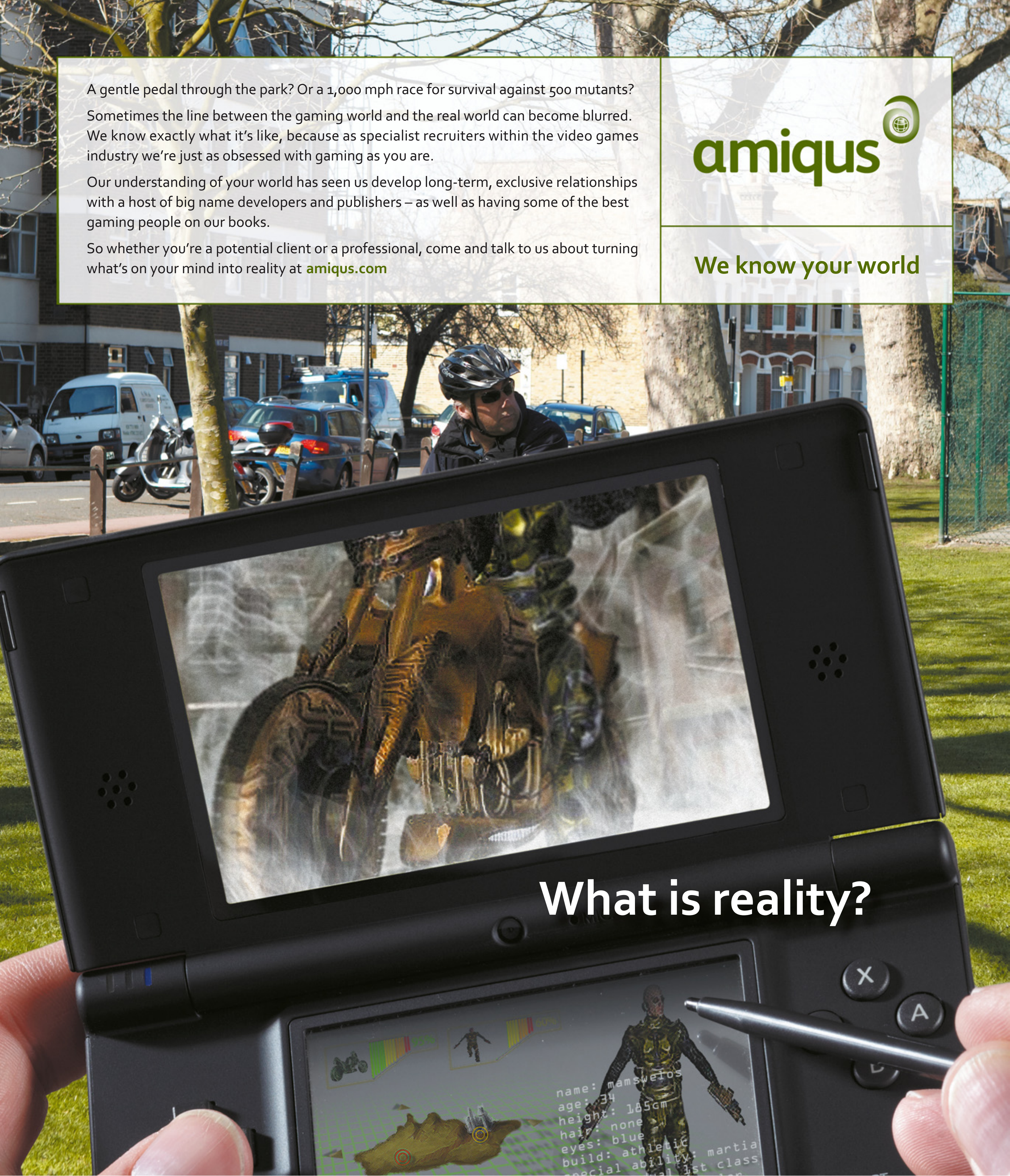
Founded in 1965, Uxbridge received an 'outstanding' rating from education inspection body OFSTED in 2008

Students can progress on to our HND in Interactive Media, where they will have the opportunity to learn Pixologic ZBrush and Foundry NukeX. These tools allow our students to widen their skill set and explore other areas in computer graphics, such as visual effects for film and television.

Do you feel the traditional routes into the game industry – maths and physics, for example – are becoming less relevant with the advent of more advanced tools like Maya?
Often, school-leavers who want to get into games development are advised to study A-levels in maths, physics and computing, which would have been correct several years ago. Today, technology has changed so much – there are so many directions that students can follow that it's not purely a maths and science focused area any more. Although mathematics is still required in the development of tools such as games engines, it's no longer a prerequisite if you want to pursue a career in, for example, 3D modelling and animation. A mathematics module is included on our Level 3 course to cater for students who wish to follow our programming route.



3D rendering, Flash, creative game creation and hairdressing are all on the Uxbridge syllabus



A gentle pedal through the park? Or a 1,000 mph race for survival against 500 mutants?
Sometimes the line between the gaming world and the real world can become blurred. We know exactly what it's like, because as specialist recruiters within the video games industry we're just as obsessed with gaming as you are.
Our understanding of your world has seen us develop long-term, exclusive relationships with a host of big name developers and publishers – as well as having some of the best gaming people on our books.
So whether you're a potential client or a professional, come and talk to us about turning what's on your mind into reality at amiqus.com
amiqus
We know your world
What is reality?
X
A
name: mamswelos
age: 34
height: 185cm
hair: none
eyes: blue
build: athletic





Continue.

Thanks to our products Wii™ and Nintendo DS™, we are one of the leading manufacturers of video games and consoles in the field of Interactive Entertainment. Our intention is to reach everyone with our products – regardless of age, gender or experience with games. A strong and motivated team, superior quality, new concepts, the creative development and implementation of game ideas, combined with a sophisticated sales strategy, enable us to constantly surprise you with new and innovative products.

Our European localisation and development department in Frankfurt, Germany is looking for a

Japanese to UK English Translator

Tasks

In this role, you will work within a team of translators and translate game text and other associated materials into English. You will be required to:

- Translate materials from Japanese into UK English
- Adapt US English text into UK English
- Edit translations to ensure accuracy and quality
- Support other translators (French, German etc.) using UK English as their source language

Requirements

- Proficiency in Japanese
- A degree in Japanese or translation, or previous experience in a similar role
- Thorough knowledge of English style and grammar
- Familiarity with Microsoft Office
- Teamwork and flexibility

Knowledge of German is not required, as office business is conducted entirely in English.

We look forward to receiving your application (including education history) in English and your earliest possible starting date.

Please use the application form on our web site.

Nintendo of Europe GmbH
Human Resources
Nintendo Center
63760 Großostheim
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www.nintendo-europe.com


BY CLINT HOCKING

SOMETHING FROM (CLICK) NOTHING Convergence culture

Part four: An offer that can't be refused

Thought Experiment One: imagine *Pong*, tweaked to be more exciting. Instead of showing the AI paddle on the other side of the screen, we hide from the player everything that happens over the centre line. An elegant pacing algorithm tracks the player's returns and the score of the game, and fakes everything that happens over the line in order to constantly escalate the intensity. *Pong* matches would be full of ever more spectacular volleys reaching increasingly extreme climaxes. Every game would be more incredible than the last – and yet, very obviously, something would be lost, and this game would suck.

Thought Experiment Two: imagine a *Battlefield 2* match in which both team commanders colluded to make the match as dramatically exciting as possible for the unwitting players on the ground. The commanders would share information to guide their respective squads into interestingly asymmetric skirmishes. They would track the score and collaborate to keep things close, ensuring things like supply drops, artillery strikes and air support always arrived at the most desperate hour. Suddenly, every *Battlefield 2* match would be as good as the best one you ever had (unless you discovered the collusion, in which case it would all suddenly seem very pointless).

> Your Uncle Bob would love nothing more than to have you as his man on the ground in his ongoing feud with Mike from Accounting

The principle challenge in designing and building a dynamic narrative that responds to player action is not in the building of it (which is, itself, a wicked problem), but rather in the designing of it. It is, in fact, the same problem as designing *Extreme Pong*: that in handing over drama management to an invisible algorithm, the player has no way to know his actions are driving the story and the dynamic narrative becomes indistinguishable from an authored one – and likely not as good.

With commander mode, *Battlefield 2* hints at a way to cut the Gordian Knot: it suggests the possibility that we can outsource drama management to other players. On the one hand, playing the commander gives strong feelings of agency, and on the other, players on the ground know the difference between a high-level experience that is pre-packed by a designer and one that is managed on-the-fly by a player with an agenda.

The main problem with commander mode is that it needs to be synchronised with the main game at runtime, making it a pretty niche kind of fun. But I believe this is easily fixed by decoupling the 'game' of player-controlled drama management from the low-level action game being managed. If the management game is designed to be fun as a management game instead of as a part of a low-level combat game, then one player's management game becomes another player's drama manager. This is where intramedia convergence comes in.

Thought Experiment Three: imagine *Mafia II*, the open-world game, shipped with *Mafia Wars*, the mobile application, as its player narrative driver. Instead of spamming all of Facebook with requests to join a mob, *Mafia Wars* players would try to recruit the best players of *Mafia II* to join their mobs. Players of *Mafia II* would subscribe to a handful of *Mafia Wars* players, who would become the warring Dons of their game world, and the missions they were sent on would have meaningful repercussions in their worlds. As one *Mafia Wars* Don rises to power, his influence cascades throughout the game worlds of his subscribers. As other Dons rise to challenge him, *Mafia II* players find themselves embroiled in the familial intrigue of the best mafia fiction – contracted to protect, bribed to betray or tasked to assassinate based on the real needs of real players (who would in fact be playing a different, but connected, game).

Unlike the *Extreme Pong* example, the beauty of this intramedia link between two different games connected via the cloud is that players on both sides of the line know there are other players out there returning their volley. At the same time, because the players operating at the *Mafia Wars* level are not tied to the minute to minute play the way commanders are in *Battlefield 2*, they can appreciate the game at the pace of a social, bite-sized, mobile game.

Even more important is the bridge-building between two divergent audiences. The overlap in the Venn diagram between *Mafia Wars* players and *Mafia II* players is probably not great, but then neither is the overlap being proposed between their games. Your Uncle Bob from Wisconsin who plays *Wii Sports* with you every Thanksgiving at grandma's probably loves Mario Puzo books and clicks away at *Mafia Wars* three or four times a day between meetings, and would love nothing more than to have you as his man on the ground in his ongoing feud with Mike from Accounting. And with every click the decisions he makes in his game world could be changing the landscape in yours, and vice versa.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com


Illustration: Martin Davies

HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

Five hours with Alan Wake

BY RANDY SMITH

If you've noticed all of my references to *Fallout 3* and *GTA*, then you're in position to hit me where it hurts: I don't play enough games. Plus, it's proved challenging to be more 'design journal-y' here because Tiger Style's new project isn't far enough along to discuss, other than to drop references intended for hindsight. So in an effort to both catch up and ground design topics in specifics, I'm going to play and write about some recent games. Kind of like reviews, except, hopefully, different. I'm starting with *Alan Wake* because it not only seems a representative modern blockbuster, but its domestic setting and real-world characters sparkle with promise.

Alan Wake is a technical tour de force. All those fancy rendering features they pushed in your face years ago are there: the sweeping vistas, dynamic lighting, curling atmospherics, vibrant water, all in support of a visually stunning slice of America they call 'Maine' (because of Stephen King, one assumes). This mania for making the world realistic is a distant memory for me these days. I can clearly tell I'm on a barge approaching a sleepy seaside town, but does it make sense that in five years these graphics will be considered 'dated'?

This is the entertainment we offer audiences? A book or film would have delivered more value for less time and money



Let's talk about how a game's features represent its values. *Alan Wake*'s characters are impressively photoreal, but they sport some seriously embarrassing lip-syncing. The world is littered with physical props that are otherwise non-interactive. Whenever you're not fighting, the emphasis is on keeping you busy with vacant mini-quests while rushing through the plot development then reinforcing it about a thousand times afterwards. Clearly, we're to believe that players are impatient, require constant goal completion, and must be forced into understanding what's going on.

There's a revealing scene in which an axe murderer is chopping his way into your cabin and you're given seconds to respond. Should I pry open the window? Light the stove? Search for improvised weapons? Hide under the bed? All of those could kick off an interesting horror scene, but no: I was supposed to wait until a new exit was scripted to appear. When we're allowed to interact and when we're not proves absolutely baffling. A cinematic in which I have an argument with my wife is followed by an interactive sequence in which I storm around angrily. I use 'interactive' loosely because there is nothing to do, but fortunately it only lasts a second before the wife screams for help. 'This'll be exciting!' I think. 'I'm going to bash open the door, follow her cries for help, discover an open window, and execute a daring rescue dive into the lake!' All that happens, but sadly it happens in another cutscene. For the past few minutes, all I've been allowed to do is, explicitly, nothing. The value declaration most brutally asserted by *Alan Wake*'s features is just that: players only need to interact when it's really important.

Which, of course, means combat, the interactive soul of far too many triple-A productions. *Alan Wake*'s flashlight/gun combo makes for cinematic moments the player truly owns: fending off the hordes by blinding them, dodging axe swings, coming up shooting. All great stuff, even if the torch battery resource is contrived beyond belief in conformity with survival horror tropes, and the bottom drops out in terms of approachability, forcing players to master the system through trial and error.

At one point I was too low on ammo and without any idea how to proceed. So I took a break, but my mind flickered back hungrily. Remedy's engine powerfully captures being alone in the woods, scanning the night with a flashlight, the dark energy of the natural world looming above and bubbling below. What if I was roaming a large area, searching for my wife's corpse uncertainly, allowed to give up the hunt whenever I felt I'd acquired enough evidence? Or what if I was convinced someone was following me around the lumberyard, but I could only confront them if I were able to pin them in my flashlight beam? Compared to blasting endless pop-up bogeymen, those experiences fit the engine just as natively, the fiction more so.

I didn't play long, so I'm sure I missed plenty more plot twists, wow moments, creature types and weapon upgrades, but the pattern seemed established. This is fundamentally a flashlight fighting game embedded in long stretches of semi-interactive story that would have been better told in another medium. *Alan Wake* walks right up to the precipice of something truly interesting and, as surely as colliding with an invisible wall, resolutely declines to jump in, rooted firmly in paint-by-numbers game design. Seen from a historical perspective, it's a tech demo for incremental rendering improvements. From inside jokes, Easter eggs, obvious references to obvious film influences and gratuitous team cameos, this is a production by players, for players, exactly how big-budget games are supposed to be made. But I can't help wondering: *this* is the entertainment we offer audiences? A book or film would have delivered more value for less time and money.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider, *is available now for iPhone and iPod Touch*



Illustration: Martin Davies

Days of the living dead

BY STEVEN POOLE

Sometimes you need to go lo-fi. Ears fatigued by commercial music tweaked to homogeneous living death by boffin producers using 70 plug-ins per channel can be perked up by the rough magic of one musician's homebrewed chiptune. The libel-cautious, obediently safe ruminations of well-padded corporate newspaper columnists may be thrown into stark relief by one inventively obscene blogger. And the domesticated surrealism of computer-generated horror-movie blockbusters pales into infantile scribbling when set beside Alain Resnais's authentically shocking and disturbing, but comparatively technically primitive, Last Year At Marienbad.

Enter, then, Barry Steakfries, sweary and cigar-chomping hero of Halfbrick's instant lo-fi classic *Age Of Zombies*. I discovered it quite serendipitously. A couple of friends came over for the weekend, and late one evening they suggested we play some games. I soon realised that not only would it have taken hours to explain to them what all the buttons do in *Modern Warfare 2*, but that they would anyway have been more a flailing hindrance than a help in Special Ops, and I would probably end up shooting them myself. Right from the start of *Age Of Zombies*, however, when the hero simply shoots the villain to the accompaniment of a jerky blood-shower animation and a delicious squelching noise, we were all laughing helplessly and passing the pad around.

> "It is looking increasingly as though the big corporate games are all about shopping, while the indie games are all about death"

But *Age Of Zombies* is not brilliant simply because anyone can pick up and play it. The same is true of a game that, superficially, is almost mechanically indistinguishable: *Zombie Apocalypse*. The latter has far more graphical bling, but they are both essentially *Robotron* derivatives with zombies (or, as we might have to start calling them, Zombietrons). *Apocalypse* boasts an additional risk-reward aspect with its chainsaw moves, and far busier and more impressive environments. Yet to me it felt superlatively 'meh', whereas *Age Of Zombies* induces from the start consistent tension, satisfaction and delight.

One perhaps not-so-trivial reason for this lies in the question of collision detection. In *Age Of Zombies'* rectilinear top-down view, with pseudo-3D figures casting helpful disc shadows, it is always clear enough whether you are touching a zombie or not. *Apocalypse*, on the other hand, affects a vanishing-point aerial perspective where the question of bodily proximity to rotting flesh is much more muddied. It is a fundamental prerequisite of the fairness of any *Robotron* clone that dying should be your own fault, and that the game should always give you complete information as to your own doom's incipience. *Zombie Apocalypse*'s extra fraction of a pseudodimension, as well as its general gloom and hyperactive effects, make it feel notably more soggy and arbitrary.

This vice is not limited to *Zombie Apocalypse* alone, of course. One of the virtues of 8- and 16bit gaming that modern 3D games have rarely equalled is the precision and predictability of collision detection between bunches of pixels on a flat (or effectively flat) plane. We have grown accustomed to the apparently inherent woolliness of contemporary games, muttering to ourselves "I'm sure I didn't actually touch that" while steering our expensive, stiff-lumbar'd avatars through insanely detailed canyons of rock, glumly contemplating what is next on the shopping list. Maybe it really was better in the old days.

So *Age Of Zombies'* old-school 16bit style is not just a smile-inducing homage to our shared gaming heritage, it is a perfect marriage of kinetic form with representational style. Add the pitch-perfect vocals (from the beautifully hilarious zombie moans to the variety of silly voices in which weapon pickups are announced), and the deceptively deep strategic possibilities for exploiting the environment and delaying weapon pickups, and you have a game that does just what it says on the tin, and does it perfectly.

Barry Steakfries' own cynical and wonderfully rude commentary on proceedings, meanwhile, is just the kind of thing one imagines a big-studio executive demanding be entirely rewritten, out of fear that it will offend some confused Iowa granny. Playing the game thus induces a delightful kind of complicity with the developers themselves: not only are you shooting thousands of zombies in the face with guns, you are also sticking it to The Man.

Last but not least of the virtues of *Age Of Zombies* is the fact that it is so blessedly short. After a couple of hours you have saved humanity and are watching the credits roll. At four quid, that turns out to be much better value for money than a blockbuster game you give up playing after eight hours because it has become such a tedious grind of token-collection and levelling. Indeed, these days it is looking increasingly as though the big corporate games are all about shopping, while the indie games are all about death. After a few thousand years of artistic experiment, I think we already know which is the richer vein.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net



Illustration: Martin Davies

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

BY N'GAI CROAL

Too soon?

By the time you read this column, some of you will be buying *Medal Of Honor*, Electronic Arts' newest entry in its long-running franchise. Others will have perused reviews of the game in outlets like **Edge**; looked at direct-feed footage on the internet; or discussed its pros and cons. But at the time of writing, a game that was once better known as an attempted reboot of a series in decline has become a political hot potato.

The controversy stems from the fact that, in *Medal Of Honor*'s multiplayer modes, gamers can play as members of the Taliban forces, facing off against the US military. Among videogame aficionados and media who are accustomed to playing as the German Axis forces (*Medal Of Honor: Allied Assault* and *Return To Castle Wolfenstein*) against the Allies or as terrorists (*Counter-Strike* and *SOCOM: US Navy Seals*) battling counter-terrorists, the multiplayer portion of *Medal Of Honor* didn't even raise an eyebrow. But according to the BBC, British Defence Secretary Liam Fox was "disgusted" and found it "shocking that someone would think it acceptable to recreate the acts of the Taliban against British soldiers". Fox proceeded to call upon UK retailers to refuse to stock the game in their stores.

As part of its defence, EA pointed out that there are no British troops in the game. Nevertheless, the controversy spread back over to the United States. There, Commander Major General Bruce Casella, the head of the Army and Air Force Exchange Service, made the decision not to carry the game in military stores around the world, which meant GameStop couldn't carry the title in any of its on-base outlets. "Out of respect to those we serve," Casella told Kotaku, "we will not be stocking this game."

The irony here is that while EA has acknowledged that it had been bracing itself for a possible outcry, the implication of its public statements is that it expected that if any controversy should arise, it would be from *Medal Of Honor*'s campaign, not its multiplayer mode. EA Games label president Frank Gibeau told the BBC back in June that it was a "big risk" to set the game during an ongoing conflict, but that "we took a thoughtful approach too in that a lot of current soldiers are advising us on the game, to ensure it is authentic and realistic". And at the time, Gibeau sounded optimistic, given a positive response to initial trailers. "We got a lot of feedback from military families [after the release of the game trailer] that was positive, and thanking us for showing stories of

> "It's a reminder that what is custom among gamers can still be anathema to those who don't understand the medium"



real guys and handling the subject in a serious way, rather than a hyperbolic 'Rambo' sort of way." So it must have come as something of a shock to EA when, just two months from release, it was *Medal Of Honor*'s multiplayer that would ignite the subsequent hullabaloo.

It's a sobering reminder that what is custom among gamers can still be anathema to those who don't understand the medium. As news of the US military's decision circulated, EA defended the opposing sides in its multiplayer mode by comparing it to cops and robbers. "Multiplayer is built on the same dynamic that ruled the cops-and-robbers game we played in our parents' backyard," EA spokesperson Jeff Brown told the New York Times. "Someone is the good guy. Someone is the bad guy. When the robbers won, it didn't mean those kids wanted to kill the police." It's a shrewd analogy for how multiplayer operates: it doesn't engender empathy and identification with the 'bad guys' any more than would playing the opposing force during a real-life military exercise.

But the amorality of that perspective – and I mean 'amorality' as in 'neither moral nor immoral' – is unlikely to sway outsiders who assume that those who would play as the Taliban will somehow identify as the Taliban. Or those who take offence at the prospect of virtual Taliban soldiers killing virtual US forces at a time when real Taliban soldiers are killing real US forces – and vice versa. Artists of all stripes who want to tackle contemporary subject matter must ask themselves: how soon is too soon? But what happens when the timeline for that subject matter is the foreseeable future? And even if we could all agree that this conflict is appropriate for exploration in media that would encourage reflection among its audiences – literature, painting, music, sculpture, film, even the story-driven campaign of a videogame – is it truly appropriate for multiplayer, where even its fiercest defenders draw comparisons to the freeform play of children rather than the thoughtful contemplation of adults?

These are questions for which the answers can't be neatly divided between right and wrong. We all bring our own baggage to the table, gamers and non-gamers; military and civilian; and even within these groups there are differing opinions. Multiplayer was an area many of us felt was immune to external controversy. Now that we've learned otherwise, it's not too soon to start figuring out where we go from here.

N'Gai Croal is a writer and videogame design consultant. You can follow him online at ncroal.tumblr.com

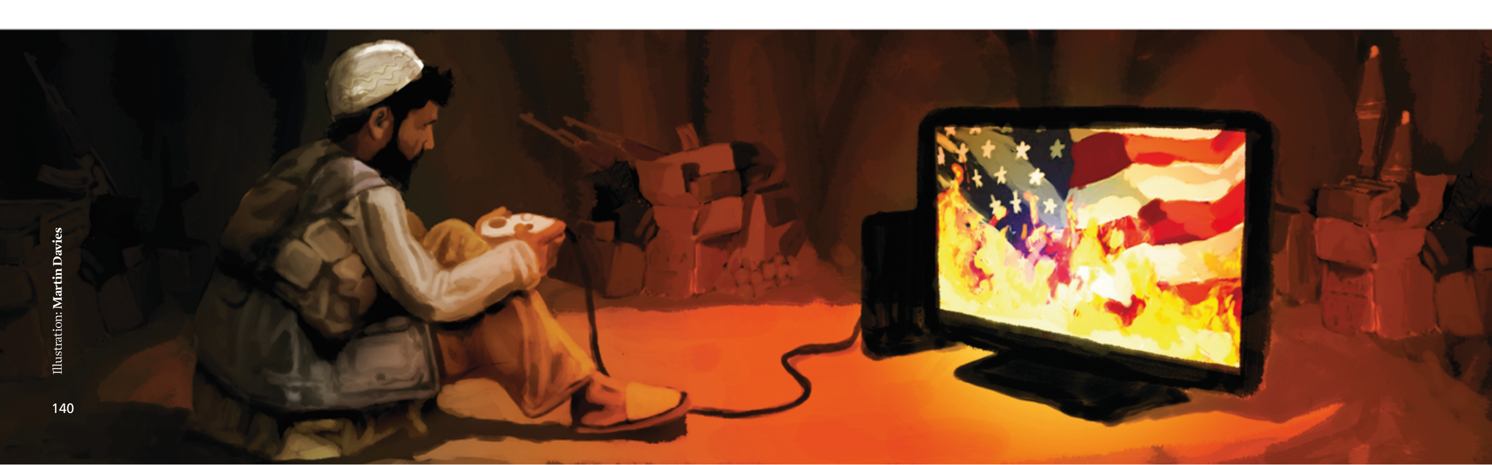


Illustration: Martin Davies

Inbox



Issue 219



ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum
forums.next-gen.biz

Topic: Happy birthday Mario!
Yes, the world's most famous plumber, Mario, is about to turn 25. So what's your fondest Mario memory?

Mario Kart **for me, then** ***64*****, then** ***Galaxy*****. Just awesome.**
Hulka T

To Mario and Nintendo. May we have more many genius and fun games like ***Super Mario World*****,** ***Yoshi's Island*****,** ***Mario 64*** **and** ***Mario Galaxy*****. Not to mention** ***Super Mario Kart*** **and** ***Mario RPG*****.**
hylian_elf

I'm a fan of the games – not the mascot. The sense of inertia in those old 2D games and the pixel-perfect placement of obstacles in the levels are still impressive.
davyK

Never liked him much. Something weird about him.
jmichaelwood

I read **E**218's feature on Kinect with interest and a definite wry grin – I've been cleaning out drawers of old magazines recently and just last week read of similar hyperbolic comments in **Edge** of 'extraordinary' potential and possible ways to push gaming with the Wii's unveiling.

That's not to say Wii's software lineup is without merit, but owners of that system were drawn in by the original idea not seeming anywhere near as reactionary as Kinect does. After dredging through the shovelware, they're rewarded by the gems. The question is whether Kinect will be around long enough for the gems to surface.

A bigger issue, as it pertains to my living arrangements at least, wasn't mentioned in your article – the minimum distance Kinect requires between the player and the hardware. I've read everything from 1.8 to three metres (six to ten feet, imperialists) being needed for Kinect to 'see' you properly (or, more accurately, track your body bits). Even at the lower ends of the spectrum this would kill Kinect in Japan (not that it'd need the help), and still cause problems for western apartments and teenagers' bedrooms.

There's something to be said for the adspeak of 'moving consoles out of the bedroom and into the living room' and 'reaching new audiences', but with this spacing issue, not to mention the price of hardware and software, Kinect seems less everyman and more western middle-class suburbia by the minute.
Chris Charlton

A fair concern, and one Microsoft is clearly aware of (its ads consisting largely of living room get-togethers). And, yes, it's certainly an issue in Japan, where space-related concerns have been hot topics among those who care about Xbox 360. We'll have some firm clarification next issue.



Letter of the month wins a DSi XL

I write as a concerned southpaw. I watched coverage of Nintendo's E3 offerings this year with awe, as I marvelled at the 3DS (or, rather, others' reactions to it), and the promising footage of Link's next adventure in *Skyward Sword*. I then felt my heart sink as I read the analyses of many of the commentators, most of whom were sharper than I was in recognising that these new products may be somewhat less than suitable for us left-handers.

In its rush to beat the competition, is the industry slowly creeping toward a future where, as well as system requirements, there are user requirements?

As an owner of current-generation Nintendo hardware, there has generally always been a workaround available for left-handed control. For those DS games that require simultaneous use of the D-pad and stylus, often the face buttons can be used in place of the pad without too much loss in fidelity of control. In *Twilight Princess* for Wii (where Link does actually wield his sword in his left hand), it made no difference if I held the Nunchuk in the left or right hand. The Wii control system itself is wonderfully adaptable to either bias, as no other console controller has been since joysticks went out of fashion. However, with this newer generation of hardware and software it seems as though we are quietly leaving this consideration aside in the name of better immersion and technological advancement, whilst keeping manufacturing and development costs under control. In truth, even where specific provision has been made for left-handedness (such as in *Modern Warfare 2*'s 'southpaw' control scheme for PS3/360), it is not always used. Years of motor training to use the left thumb to move and the right to pivot, combined with a fear that all future FPSes may not have the same option, has left me unable to make the switch. This is not a problem in the context of a 'learned' system like the dual analogue sticks or even musical instruments where we all start at the same level of incompetence due to unfamiliarity with the movements. On the other hand, if developers are creating games where natural motion and reactions directly feed the game, especially where fine motor control is required, the left-handed are immediately on a steep, frustrating learning curve.

Elsewhere, not only the left-handed population suffer human-machine interface incompatibilities. What of those who have lost sight in one eye and therefore the capacity for stereoscopic vision? Indeed, 3D gaming is not widespread. Even when it becomes so, it is initially unlikely to



be a core aspect of many games. When that day comes, though, when 3D is all but a requirement, what will happen then? Notice also Microsoft's soothing reassurances that Kinect would work for those who were seated, a concern not only for terminal couch potatoes like myself, but for those who have no choice but to play sitting or lying down. On a slightly whimsical note, remember the uproar that followed the discovery that HP's facial recognition software could not track those with dark skin? Of course, a program cannot be racist as it is not sentient, but the further we spread a technology, the more we expose its limits. Likewise, have you ever tried using voice control with a Scottish accent? The sole reason for me not purchasing *Tom Clancy's EndWar* was that I thought it would struggle to comprehend my Scottish pronunciation of the English language. Further to that matter, the recent revelation that Kinect will only recognise English and Mexican Spanish [at launch] was unsurprising, but a little saddening all the same.

It is not my intention to suggest that companies in the games industry should tailor their products to minority user groups. However, in its perpetual rush to innovate and beat the competition, is the industry slowly creeping toward a future for games, where as well as system requirements on the back of the box, there are user requirements? Only white, English-speaking, American, right-handers with 20/20 vision and peerless posture need apply.
Craig Hamilton

While there may never be a catch-all solution for games, there should certainly be more emphasis on catering to different play styles. With DLC an accelerating enterprise, though, can it be long before lefties can patch up their missed-out gaming opportunities? In the meantime, your new DSi XL will give you some more training options.

After dredging through shovelware, Wii owners are rewarded by gems. The question is whether Kinect will be around long enough for the gems to surface

In **E**219, Randy Smith asks what is our flirtation with Roger Ebert, who acts like a bully in class?

I can't remember the last time I paid tribute to a bully, because it has never happened. As such I am really not bothered by Ebert's critique of videogames and whether or not he will ever think of them as art.

Where is the videogame equivalent of Citizen Kane? I'm not sure I can put my finger on one videogame that was such an amazing success that its shining beacon of light now has more in common with a searchlight desperately seeking a pier 69 years after being made. Is Ebert telling us Citizen Kane will always be the best the filmindustry has to offer us?

Videogame developers daren't stagnate like this. New innovations and gameplay are being developed constantly. If developers are going to spend their time building products to try and enthrall consumers that look on us with disdain then their end products will only alienate themselves from their already loyal customers.

Give it up, Randy. You are already one of the successful cool kids in the class. Just because someone doesn't 'get you' and what you are about is not your problem. We don't need to slow down; other people need to catch up or give up trying.
Mark Woolaway



Do left-handers like Link and Craig Hamilton face a battle to be accommodated nowadays?



Topic: Mwa-hah-hah-haaaaaah!
Who/what are the most villainous of game villains?
JB

Sephiroth (as in *FFVII* – I'll ignore his incarnations in other titles) is one of the most well crafted villains of recent games. He was actually introduced to the player in a very subtle way, as a quasi-legendary character mentioned in passing by other characters. When he makes a personal appearance it's in a flashback as a high-level (allied) character that puts you to shame.
Time on my hands

Tentacle, from *Day Of The Tentacle*. The only villain I can think of who could make me laugh.
Coopers_Green

Dr Breen during *Half-Life 2* is excellent. His continued misplaced superiority, bargaining and mocking of Freeman is brilliantly played with an undercurrent of desperation and fear toward the end of the game as he begins to fear what might happen if you succeed and his position with the Combine Overseers becomes more and more threatened.

It also really made you want to confront him, while feeling pity for his misplaced betrayal of humanity and the obvious conflicts that it caused him – trying to convince himself and you that he was doing the right thing.
Gremill

Nemesis for me is the one villain that stands out. HE ALWAYS COMES, and he's so evil all you can do is run.

And of course, the nuke in *Blast Corps*. Always slowly creeping forward, you can't stop it, only get out of its way. And of course, it could blow up teh worldz.
regmcfly

That zig-zag shape from *Tetris* was a right little bastard.
Blue Swirl

The gaming demographic has certainly changed since I first took up my favourite pastime nearly 20 years ago. Over those years we have seen games targeted more and more at young adults with a lot of time and money and their disposal. I have been lucky enough to count myself among this group. However, having recently got married, it dawned on me that I might one day fall into a new category – parent. Obviously, becoming a dad would easily eclipse the greatest of my gaming achievements. However, I am savvy enough to know that this would have a serious impact upon my gaming habits.

My concern is that developers do not take into consideration the parents (or anyone with a busy lifestyle) who cannot dedicate the hours required to get the most out of their latest offering. If a child needed my attention in the middle of vital cutscene or mission I would obviously drop what I was doing immediately. This means I miss the cutscene (unless they can be paused – which is rare) and may not be able to continue my adventuring from where I left off. I know this goes against the grain for hardcore gamers, but shouldn't we be able to pause and save a game in the middle of a cutscene or a mission? If this sort of allowance doesn't become the norm, I will find myself squeezing in only 20 minutes of *Street Fighter IV* a night rather than *Red Dead Redemption*.

Continued



I hope that when the time comes, the choice of game I wish to play is not dictated by something as small as not being able to save the game at will. It's difficult enough trying to keep my wife happy even now when I'm indulging in hour-long gaming sessions. I would love to hear from fellow readers or the **Edge** team on the subject of gaming and parenthood. No doubt some of you are already parents. Does having children mean it's all game over?
Mike Watson

What's worse, a cutscene that can't be paused, or one that can't be skipped? Whatever the case, it's high time we had some kind of standardisation for these sorts of issues across all console gaming. How about we start some kind of initiative? Let us know your thoughts on any issues of this nature and we'll put them to a bundle of leading developers and print their feedback in the magazine. And parenting killing off your gaming time? Let's have those tales, too.

I had to express my growing fear of the direction indie gaming is heading. Currently with critical acclaim going to such games as *Braid* and *Limbo*, it raises a question of what we want from the indie market. While these games are beautiful and atmospheric, I find the lack of gameplay and storytelling troubling. Take *Limbo*, for example. Its look and feel is what makes gaming stand out from other forms of entertainment, but the gameplay is stale and the storytelling leaves much to be desired. It would appear that indie games will only be given high praise for being beautiful instead of being deep and complex. Now my fear is that the small development teams will try to copy the success of these games by making their titles stand out visually instead of functionally. I wanted to express my fear to see if I am over-reacting to this or if others are beginning to want more from the indie gaming market.
Ryon Jones

But plenty of indie games have earned praise despite looking like dog's breakfasts. You're fixating on two particularly mainstream examples, and we can't see either game's success discouraging others from taking gameplay risks. Anyone disagree?

I was very disappointed with Steven Poole's column in **E**214 about people seemingly deciding that in order for a medium to count as 'mature' it must be able elicit tears from you. From the start I immediately wanted to stop and correct him, especially when he asks: "Why is crying thought superior to, or more authentic than, laughing, or feeling terrified, or joyously triumphant, etc?" The point is that all of those latter emotions are already abundant and widely experienced in games. No one's asking for those because we already have loads. It's not that games that make you cry are more mature, it's that they're practically non-existent in our medium.

Here's an analogy. Imagine I want a cheese sandwich and I go to the supermarket and get bread, margarine, cucumber and tomatoes. I go to the checkout and say: "I'm making a cheese sandwich." The cashier says: "Well, you'll probably want some cheese, then." I could respond by saying I have all the ingredients I need to make a basic sandwich but she'd be well within her rights to say: "Yes, but if you want a cheese sandwich, you'll need to put some cheese in it." If I took Steven's column as a rule, I would probably ask her why she thinks cheese is so much more of an important constituent of a cheese sandwich than, say, bread or margarine. I imagine at this point she'd either explain to me that she saw I already had all the other ingredients and didn't feel she needed to mention them, call security or go and fetch the damn cheese herself.

I agree that some developers may blindly be taking the crying theme a little too seriously, but to criticise people for holding one emotion above all others when in fact they were merely pointing out a missing ingredient from the 'maturity' formula was, in my opinion, misguided.
Chris Hemmens

The problem with Stephen Poole, of course, is that he's never had to make a cheese sandwich in his life. (It's all butlers and maids over at his gated hacienda.) So perhaps we should cut him some slack.



Topic: Gaming fiction

Given my resurfacing love for *Halo* recently, for the first time ever I tried some gaming fiction in the shape of Halo Evolutions which is a collection of stories from the *Halo* universe.

To my surprise I really enjoyed most of it.

Has anyone else tried any gaming fiction and what would you recommend?

Also, do you think such fiction adds to a games universe or detracts from it?
wonderbanana

I haven't read any of the *Halo* or *Gears Of War* novels, because, c'mon, how many times can you read 'Then they ran to cover. Then they threw a grenade. "Boom, headshot!" shouted Cole, for the 50th time that day'?
Blue Swirl

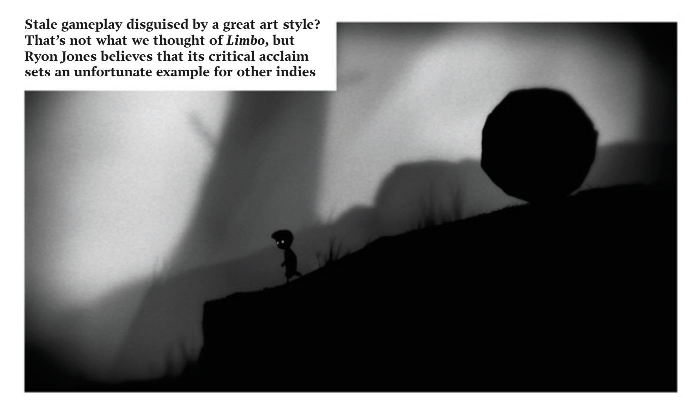
Personally, I preferred the *Halo* story before they expanded and explained everything. Nods and hints can be much more entertaining than a fleshed-out space opera.
Aye Are

Are they any good in their own right, or are they just entertaining because you already have an established connection with the story/ characters/sticky grenades?
sandmanJO3

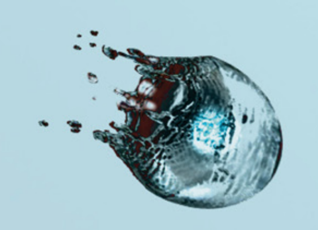
I'd say it helps if you know the basics of the universe but then I have no way to look at it from the other perspective.

Having played the games I know what everything looks like and who everyone is supposed to be – and that must make a difference.
wonderbanana

Stale gameplay disguised by a great art style? That's not what we thought of *Limbo*, but Ryon Jones believes that its critical acclaim sets an unfortunate example for other indies



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